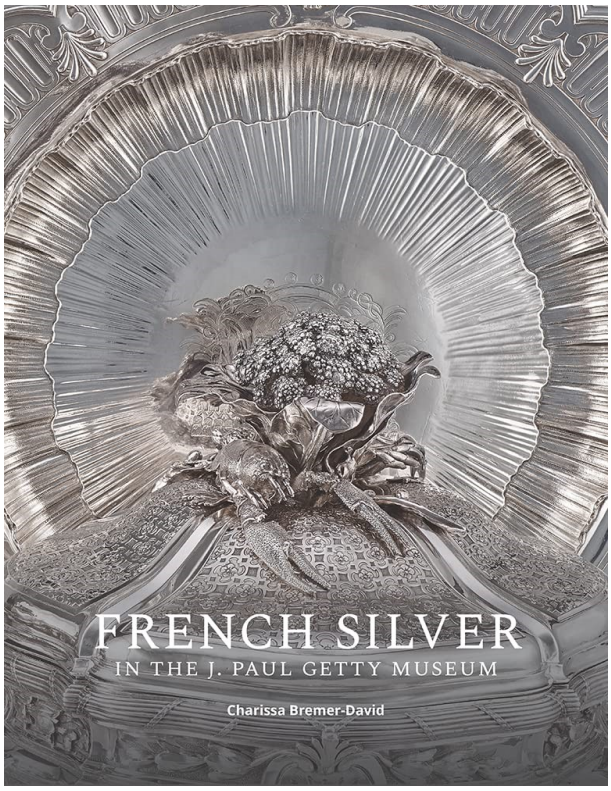

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FRENCH SILVER – GETTY MUSEUM EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

By Anne Thackray

Review of Charissa Bremer-David, *French Silver in the J. Paul Getty Museum* with technical contributions by Jessica Chasen, Arlen Heginbotham, and Julie Wolfe (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2023) (166pp, illustrated).

The Getty Museum has long focused on French decorative arts, as its superb collection of eighteenth-century French furniture attests. After publishing a two-part catalogue about that furniture, the Museum has now brought out a catalogue presenting a selection of its holdings in French silver.

French Silver in the J. Paul Getty Museum is written by Charissa Bremer-David, formerly a curator in the Getty’s Sculpture and Decorative Arts department from 2008 to 2020. The opening ‘Acknowledgements’ section reveals that as well as consulting an international array of silver experts, she undertook training in traditional silversmithing techniques: a step that should be emulated by all curators and historians of fine and decorative arts. Even an elementary understanding of the practical aspects of creating artworks would benefit us all.

Former Getty conservator Jessica Chasen and her colleagues Julie Wolfe and Arlen Heginbotham contribute information discovered through their technical examination of each object.

The Museum's founder J. Paul Getty (1892-1976) primarily collected English silver for himself. He bequeathed his English silver to the Museum, which had already established its focus on French decorative arts, and therefore deaccessioned most of it through Christie's and Sotheby's in the early 1990s. From 1982 until her retirement in 2003, the Getty's curator of decorative arts, Gillian Wilson, expanded the Getty Museum's French silver collection, specializing in Paris-made silver. All of the silver featured in this catalogue – thirty-three pieces, and components - was made in Paris, though some was later altered in England.

There are ten exhibits, discussed in chronological order.

But first, the complex topic of Parisian silver marks is clarified for readers in the opening **Note to the Reader I: Stamps and Marks** (p. 5-6). Until 1672, Parisian-made works in gold or silver bore only two stamped marks: the personal mark of the master *orfèvre* who made a piece, and the annually-changed guild mark (*le poinçon du jurande*), guaranteeing that the piece met the legal standard for silver bullion. From 1672 to 1774, however, works made in gold or silver were taxed by weight, leading to the multiplication of marks on each object.

Even more complex information, on various seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European weights for silver, and on coinage and currencies, is then given in **Note to the Reader II: Historic Units of Measure and Currency** (pp. 7-9).

The main section of the catalogue then follows: there are ten entries, presented in chronological order. Short biographies of each of the makers then follow, along with an **Appendix: Silver Alloy Analysis by X-ray Fluorescence Spectroscopy**. 'XRF', a non-destructive surface- analytical technique, measures the composition of silver artefacts to a depth of

several tens of microns. The Appendix gives a table of XRF results from the technical examination of each of the objects included in the catalogue, by Jessica Chasen, Arlen Heginbotham, and Julie Wolfe. There is also an explanation of the operating parameters of the three different XRF instruments used by the Getty's conservators over a period of several years, and of the limitations of XRF examination.

The first catalogue entry (cat. no. 1) covers the most complex object in the book: a large Water Fountain acquired by the Museum in 1981 via a private sale (Getty Museum collection 82.DG.17). This entry includes a technical report by conservator Jessica Chasen revealing that the water fountain began life as a silver flagon or *buire*.

Originally made in Paris in 1661-63 by the goldsmith Jean Leroy, the flagon was taken to London. There, in the late seventeenth century, it was altered into a two-handled water fountain, and was altered again in the mid-1700s London. The object was then used as an indoor water fountain until 1947. Such water fountains were placed on buffets in dining-rooms during formal meals served *a la française*. Servants rinsed wine-glasses in the flow of water (controlled by a tap), falling from the fountains into cisterns located below.

This first catalogue entry includes fascinating information about analysis techniques used to study the fountain: X-radiography, digital microscopy, and quantitative X-ray fluorescence (XRF). X-radiography reveals extensive modification of the body and decorative acanthus ornament. Though the fountain bears no English hallmarks, archival drawings by Robert Adam, along with these silver alloy analysis findings, suggest that the current foot and base were added to the flagon by an English goldsmith, at some time after 1720.

There are various possible interpretations of the XRF readings. The quality of silver in all components exceeds the Paris purity standards (95.8), and Britannia silver. The silver alloy used differs between parts of the fountain.

The fountain was first recorded in 1759 as part of a set of four vessels – a pair of fountains and a pair of cisterns – being worked on by the London goldsmith Phillips Garden. All these vessels were then owned by Sir Nathaniel Curzon, fifth baronet, who was invoiced for their 'new doing up', and for having their engraved heraldic arms replaced by his own arms, and those of his wife. The history of the flagon-turned-fountain is far from clear. Future developments in trace-alloy analysis and archival research may yet explain further this object's intriguing metamorphosis.

The Getty Museum's seventeenth-century silver includes (at cat. no. 2) a lidded, two-handled shallow bowl or *écuelle* Usually intended for the use of one or two people, such shallow bowls were sometimes included in personal toilette sets. The bowl is by the Paris goldsmith Louis Cordier (active 1692-1748). However, as with the flagon-turned-water-fountain (cat. no. 1), this *écuelle* is not as it originally appeared. Scientific analysis and the differing marks stamped into the lid and bowl suggest that the bowl and its lid (by an unknown maker) were not always together, but were united some time before 1923.

Originally mercury-gilded in the eighteenth century, bowl and lid were electrolytically re-gilded between the mid-1800s and their sale in 1923, while an older coat of arms was effaced, and a new coat of arms engraved. As with the flagon-turned-water-fountain, the Getty's close study of the *écuelle* reveals how even apparently untouched works in silver may have evolved significantly over time.

Decorative elements on this *écueille* reflect ornamental patterns in Masson's *Nouveaux Dessins pour graver sur l'orfèvrerie…par le seur Masson*, published by Jean Mariette in the early 1700s. Other details derive from a Nicolas Delaunay design for Marie-Thérèse of Austria, Louis XIV's queen.

The Getty holds an exceptional collection of spectacular silver by the Germain family of Paris silversmiths. In March 1982, the Museum acquired two pairs of magnificent eighteenth-century French silver tureens or *terrines* (cat. nos. 3 and 6), originally intended to serve substantial meat-and-vegetable stews.

One pair of matching tureens - each vessel still with its accompanying liner and stand – was made by Thomas Germain (1673-1748) in 1726-29, with armorials by his son François-Thomas Germain (1726-1791). Technical analysis by Julie Wolfe explains the process by which these tureens were made.

The stands and liners (*doublures*) are engraved with the coat of arms of Melo y Castro, a Portuguese aristocratic family, under a Portuguese ducal coronet, and are further engraved with the words '*FAIT.PAR.F.T. GERMAIN.ORF.SCULP.DU.ROY.AUX.GALLERIES.DU LOUVRE.PARIS*' . On one stand (Getty 82.DG.12.2.c), the inscription includes the potentially misleading date '1764'. This late date is probably explained by marks on the underside of that stand; they include a Paris mark of October 1, 1762-October 1, 1768 used for large, old works in silver to which new parts had been added.

The handles of each tureen vessel are shaped as naturalistic boar's heads, with the coarse hairs of each boar's head extending down to a cloven boar's hoof. Each tureen is thus supported by a single pair of boar 'legs'. When the tureen vessels are placed on their stands, the hairs on the underside of the vessel become visible, reflected in the surface of the silver stands.

Sadly, the boar's-head pair of tureens are not complete: the tureen lids vanished in the early 1800s. Their weights and descriptions (provided in the catalogue) recorded in eighteenth-century inventories indicate that the lids probably included trophies of birds and seafood, in both raised and cast silver. One lid had a cauliflower; the other, an artichoke.

Thomas Germain, appointed *orfèvre-sculpteur du roi* to Louis XV in September 1723, is famous for his elaborately sculptural silver table wares incorporating highly naturalistic animals, birds, crustaceans, and plants from hunting, fishing, agriculture, and cookery.

This pair of 1726-29 tureens is the earliest surviving Germain commission of this type in a public collection. They were originally made for Samuel Jacques Bernard, eldest son of the rich banker Samuel Bernard. The father had already ordered a spectacular silver table centerpiece from Thomas Germain for himself: a centerpiece that remained unfinished in Thomas's workshop at the banker's death in 1753. The centerpiece was eventually completed by Thomas's son François-Thomas Germain. It ended up – via the collection of King Josè I of Portugal – in Lisbon's Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (inv. 1827 Our).

The Getty's boar's-head tureens probably harmonized with the décor of Samuel-Jacques Bernard's dining-room. Redecorated in 1730, it featured paintings of hunting-dogs and birds by Jean-Baptiste Oudry.

Bremer-David also discusses two similar Thomas Germain boar's-head tureens: one in the Detroit Institute of Arts (inv. 59.18), and another depicted in a François Desportes painting of 1739-40. (Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, MN800). Her catalogue entry includes information about the kind of eighteenth-century French table settings in which such tureens might have been used.

After losing their lids, after 1796 the tureens were used as jardinières: recorded as such in the family inventories, and sold as jardinières at Christie's in 1975. Even without lids, however, the tureens remain so spectacular that their acquisition by the Getty is understandable.

At the same meeting where Getty trustees decided to acquire the boar's-head tureens, they also agreed to buy another pair of Thomas Germain tureens (cat. no. 6). This second pair dates from 1744-50, although their Portuguese armorials – probably those of Dom Gaspar de Bragança, legitimized son of King Joãno V of Portugal - were altered in the nineteenth century to those of a British baronet.

None of these elaborate tureens, liners, or stands bears the maker's mark of Thomas Germain, but their design indicates they were made in the Germain workshop during a transitional period. Following Thomas's death in 1748, management of the business transferred first to his widow Anne Denise Gauchelet, and then to his son, François-Thomas Germain.

Meanwhile, the Germain workshop artisans continued projects already underway, or began new ones. Such elaborate, large pieces of silver tableware took years to make. Those marks still legible on the tureens indicate that only one liner (82.DG.13.2.b.) was begun during the lifetime of Thomas Germain himself. However, the silver alloys in all parts of the tureens are consistent with the production of a single artisanal workshop in eighteenth-century Paris.

These 1744-50 quatrefoil-shaped tureens retain their correspondingly shaped lids, largely decorated with panels of quatrefoil diapering. Each lid is surmounted by a sculptural silver still life: a silver cauliflower surrounded by a crayfish, a crab, open pea pods, parsley, a gherkin, and a morel mushroom. All highly naturalistic, they were cast from molds created from castings taken from the life. The lid sculptures embody the French Rococo

love of nature, while referring to typical ingredients included in the stew (*oille*) served in these tureens (*pots à oille*).

Thomas Germain's 1735-40 drawing of a somewhat similar tureen, and the 1765 inventory of François-Thomas Germain's workshop, indicate that sheets of designs, and models of vegetables and animals (in lead, copper, and silver) were kept on workshop premises, ready to use in casting elements of the typical Germain sculptural, heaped-up still lives for tureen lids and table centerpieces.

Michèle Bimbenet-Privat has suggested that, as the tureens in catalogue. no. 6 may have been made on speculation rather than commissioned by a single patron. The different sections of these tureens – lids, vessels, liners, and stands – carry numbers ('No. 3' and 'No. 4') inscribed on them in the eighteenth century, so belonged to a set of at least four tureens. (So far, no matching tureens have been found in public collections). As this surviving pair of tureens now bear the arms of the second Baron Carrington, they must have been in England by 1868, when he died.

The Trustees's decision to acquire two pairs of French eighteenth-century tureens led to further private offers of fine French silver to the Museum, including a near-pair of three-branch Neoclassical girandoles (cat. no. 10). These originally formed part of a silver table service for court dining *à la française* made for King George III of Great Britain, commissioned by George for his Hanoverian court. After a review of designs proposed by Hanoverian, Viennese, Italian, and French goldsmiths, in 1776 the commission for the service was awarded to the Parisian goldsmith Robert Joseph Auguste, an indication of the prestige and exceptional ability of top French silversmiths at this date. Auguste was already busy with com-

missions for the imperial Russian court, so subcontracted the making of some of the Hanoverian service to other Parisian goldsmiths.

In addition, the Getty Museum has bought some of its French silver directly from dealers, for example a pair of eighteenth-century sugar casters (cat. no. 5) acquired from London's S.J. Phillips, formerly a source of British silver for J. Paul Getty.

Another pair of sugar casters now owned by the Getty (cat. no. 4) are in the form of painted-bronze sculptured child laborers, carrying silver bundles of harvested sugar canes. When detached – with some difficulty – from the bronze figures, the silver bundles can be used as free-standing casters, but eighteenth-century documents describe the casters simply as decorative 'figures'. Child laborers similar to the Getty's bronze children, on a pair of silver figurines/sugar casters in the Wadsworth Atheneum (1917.288-289), probably derive from the same model as the Getty's bronzes.

Such *chinoiserie* figurines were fashionable in the 1730s-40s. These casters originally belonged to the younger son of the rich banker Samuel Bernard (who was involved in the French East India Company); and may later have belonged to Madame de Pompadour. The eighteenth-century increase in France's sugar consumption led to a proliferation of sugar-related table wares: lidded bowls, pierced spoons, and sugar casters designed for serving different grades of sugar. (A second pair of eighteenth-century sugar casters owned by the Getty is discussed at cat. no. 5).

As the catalogue explains, sugar was initially associated with South China: hence the Chinese-type clothes worn by the child laborers on these sugar casters. During the eighteenth century, however, French-consumed sugar was increasingly imported from sugar plantations in the West Indies, where it was produced by the exploitation of enslaved people.

The Getty's most spectacular example of Germain-made silver is cat. no. 8: the '*machine d'argent*' (a term used for silver objects of exceptional artistry) made in 1754 by François-

Thomas Germain of Paris (cat. no. 8). It was commissioned by Christian Ludwig II, Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, after a 1750 visit to Germain's workshop.

This well-documented commission reveals the patron-artist relationship, communication among Louis XV's artists in the Galerie du Louvre, and the international prestige of top Paris silversmiths. The silver alone used for this pair of tureens cost more than a large Oudry painting; 'fashioning' them cost an additional 3,500 to 4,000 livres per tureen.

François-Thomas Germain continued to use the same workshop models used by his father Thomas Germain (d. 1748), manipulating them into fresh compositions of his own devising. He is thought to have employed forty workmen during the 1750s, the peak period for his workshop.

The 'machine' is composed of thirteen separately-cast silver elements in the shape of a rabbit, birds, and vegetables (including elements originally designed by Thomas Germain), all heaped together on a silver 'earth' floor, on a silver stand. The sculpture is composed to be seen from the front, rather than from all sides as in a normal table centrepiece. Designed to complement paintings by Jean-Baptiste Oudry of hunting and woodland scenes, the 'machine' celebrated the Duke's love of hunting. It is not yet known how it was displayed at his court.

The Getty Museum's sauceboat on a stand (catalogue no. 9) was acquired by the museum in 1971. Made in 1762-63 by the Paris silversmith Jean-François Chéret (1728-1809), it comprises a double-lipped, *nef*-shaped boat, resting on a separate '*berceau'* or cradle-inspired stand. The stand is formed as a cast framework of twigs, to which individually-cast leaves were soldered, creating leafy olive branches and grape vines bearing clusters of fruit – a reference to the oil and vinegar included in many French sauces. The gilt interior of the sauceboat would have protected the silver against the lemon, salt, vinegar, and other ingredients common in sauces. The expansion of sauce-making recipes in mid-eighteenth-century France led to the creation of French sauceboats in ceramics and silver.

This sauceboat resembles four other silver sauceboats from the same period, including one that may have been part of the same service.

The Getty's new *French Silver* catalogue, combining extensive scholarly research, new technical investigations, and explanations of contemporary cultural developments in eighteenth-century France, is a model of a decorative arts catalogue, an exceptional achievement that must have taken years to produce.

The only flaws are minor. The abundance of highly-detailed information in the catalogue means that casual readers may miss the significance of some of the facts given. For example, in the entry for catalogue no. 3 (the boar's-head-handled tureens), the implications of the disparity between the 1720s marks on one stand and the engraved date 1764 on the same stand (information given on p. 49) should perhaps have been spelled out in the main text, rather than left to the reader to discover in the section on the stand's marks.

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