

# Jewellery Studies

## Book Reviews



### ***A Royal Renaissance Treasure and its Afterlives: The Royal Clock Salt: 227 (British Museum Research Publications)***

Reviewed by Nigel Israel

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# *A Royal Renaissance Treasure and its Afterlives: The Royal Clock Salt*

Edited by Timothy Schroder and Dora Thornton. British Museum Research Publication 227, (2021)  
ISBN: 9780861592272, ISSN: 1747 3640, 142 pp, paperback, £40.

The Royal Clock Salt is one of the great treasures of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths (an ancient City of London Livery Company that is still hugely active in the silver and jewellery world). It has been first almost certainly identified in the great inventory of 1547 of Henry VIII's possessions, taken after his death. It is also one of only four objects currently identified as surviving from Henry's Jewel House.

It is a remarkable display object, made of silver gilt and incorporating decorative elements of enamel, shell, agate pearls and garnets, in addition to the clock mechanism contained within a rock crystal cylinder. The rock crystal may have been reused from an earlier object. Standing on six agate and silver gilt claw and ball feet, the lower part of the object is hexagonal and set with shell cameo busts carved in deep relief. The busts are mounted on blue enamel plaques embellished with gilding, as are the cabochon garnets on the hexagonal top of the object. Jewel-like though it is now, it would have been even more so when it was made: the enamels have mostly deteriorated, and their refined, gilded surface is much faded.

Unlike much of the Company's collection it was acquired relatively recently, in 1967, after it had been sold at auction to dealers and an export ban placed on it to stop its sale abroad. The British Museum was having difficulty in raising the required £28,000, and, with the Museum's agreement, the Company's Court made the bold decision that the Company should purchase it. It was lent by the Company to the British Museum for display in the new Waddesdon Bequest gallery from 2018 up until 2020, generating much new research, including a one day conference in Goldsmiths' hall in November 2018. This volume gathers together the edited presentations of this collaborative research project between the British Museum, the Goldsmiths' Company and The Rothschild Foundation.

The introduction: 'A Royal Treasure and its Role in the Renaissance Court; the Royal Clock Salt', sets the scene of what follows. Different forms of clock salts are listed in contemporary inventories across Europe, but even in its incomplete and damaged state the Royal Clock Salt is the only identified Renaissance survivor. It is not clear what its function exactly was, or, indeed, if it ever actually had a receptacle for salt. Salt, with its corrosive properties, does not seem an ideal companion for a mechanical device. Possibly it was described as a salt due to its general form, or perhaps to its important place on the table. There follow ten superb full page plates of the Royal Clock Salt.



Image reproduced courtesy of the Goldsmiths' Company



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It must be said that of the eight chapters that follow, only three relate specifically to the salt itself: 'The Clock Salt and its History after the Reign of Charles I' by Rosemary Ransome Wallis, the technical study by a team at the British Museum (see below for more on these two chapters), and chapter 3 'Pierre Mangot and Goldsmiths at the Court of Francis I of France' by Michèle Bimbenet-Privat, which discusses the life of the maker and compares the Royal Clock Salt with other works attributed to him.

It is not known how the Royal Clock Salt arrived in England. Although there is speculation that it may have been a gift to Henry VIII from Francis I, there is so far no proof of that. Timothy Schroder in his chapter 'Diplomatic Gifts between Francis I of France and Henry VIII of England' describes the extraordinary exchange of gifts between the two Kings and also between their courtiers. This seems to have been in the nature of a trade as each tried to outdo the other. The value of the objects exchanged was truly eye-watering. In Paulus Rainer's 'For the Honour of the King: Some Thoughts on the Function of *Objets d'Art* at the French Court of Francis I', it is shown how Francis took a personal interest in the creation and purchase of magnificent objects which he saw as enhancing his status and thus also the status of his court.

In 'The Sibyls Casket in the British Museum as an Early Work Attributed to Pierre Mangot and its Relationship to the Royal Clock Salt', Dora Thornton dissects the casket, showing the many

similarities in style and techniques with the Salt. A particularly interesting image is of the casket completely dismantled into its component parts for conservation. It is disappointing that the undefinable term 'semi-precious stones' is still being used.

'Hans Holbein the Younger as Designer for Goldsmiths in Tudor England', by Olga Horbatch seeks to further expand on the context in which decorative arts were produced. Approximately 200 of Holbein's drawings depict a wide range of objects and ornamental details, including prestigious metalwork, arms and armour, clocks, jewellery accessories and furniture. Although no surviving metalwork can be firmly connected to the drawings (two have been suggested) there are several drawings that do relate to pieces in royal inventories and gift registers. There is not enough evidence, however, to know to what extent the drawings represent finished designs, or working designs that would have been modified by the craftsmen.

In 1850 William Stopford, who married into the Sackville family, later taking the name, lent the Royal Clock Salt to an exhibition held by the Fine Arts Society, and in 1862 to the Special Loan Exhibition at the South Kensington Museum. The latter displayed approximately 9,000 objects from over 500 collections and between June and November had nearly 900,000 visitors. The Rothschilds were major lenders to both exhibitions and perhaps this was the inspiration to include in this publication a chapter by Julia Siemon 'Rothschild Family Collecting and the Taste for Continental Silver in 19th-Century England'. The Rothschilds

were certainly huge collectors of Renaissance objects, and one feels sure that they would have loved to acquire the Royal Clock Salt. It is certainly arguable that the scale of their collections and exhibition loans had a significant effect on public taste in regard to such items.

Rosemary Ransome Wallis has provided a concise history of the Royal Clock Salt from 1649 when the Commonwealth sold it, up to the present. The sale was recorded as being to a Mr Smith, possibly a *nom de plume* for the 2nd Earl of Peterborough. The earl was an ancestor of the Sackville family who certainly owned the Royal Clock Salt in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries until selling it at Christies in 1967 for 7,000 guineas (all auctions were then conducted in guineas). The sale generated much interest and research into the significance of the object, establishing its royal connections, hence the £28,000 that the purchasing dealers then asked for. Upon its acquisition by the Goldsmiths Company it was in a somewhat parlous state and, under the auspices of John Hayward, underwent considerable restoration: perhaps rather more than would now be the case when the emphasis is more on conservation than restoration.

The final chapter relates the scientific investigations that the

British Museum team were able to undertake in the very short time, about one week, the Royal Clock Salt was available to them before it went on display. The British Museum commissioned a new X-ray imaging laboratory in 2017. This laboratory is unique in that it can accommodate very large objects (e.g. statues up to 2m tall). Additionally the lab has X-ray computed tomography (CT) capability, which is used to generate 3-dimensional X-ray images. These techniques can be employed on objects such as the Royal Clock Salt to investigate production technology, to identify later restoration comprising different materials, to check for internal damage and many other purposes. X-radiography revealed details not otherwise observable about its construction and restorations. X-ray fluorescence supplied much information on the enamelling, including that some apparent enamel is in fact paint restoration. Digital microscopy confirmed that the cameos are indeed shell rather than hardstone. Much data was obtained from these investigations that can be analysed in the future.

The Clock movement was examined horologically. It has repeating work so cannot date to before the 1670s, but much about it suggests late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Interestingly no compelling evidence was found that the Royal



Image reproduced courtesy of the Goldsmiths' Company

Clock Salt had a clock movement before the current one. That raises big questions about its inventory identifications. If it did originally have a clock movement, would it have been within the rock crystal, or would it have been more in the orientation of a table clock? The latter, however, would raise problems about visibility of the face and hands within the object.

In the short conclusion by Timothy Schroder and Dora Thornton, they stress that the Royal Clock Salt is an exceptional survivor from the vast array of 'like minded' objects in Henry VIII's court, collectively representing a particular kind of princely taste: costly, fashionable, learned in design and refined in execution. They end by saying that this publication addresses many important questions, but others remain: was the Clock Salt actually used on the royal dining table, or was its only role to be seen with other objects in the privy chamber? Have the many modifications over the centuries been fully accounted for? Can we be certain, above all, that it actually combined the functions of a salt and a timepiece, or was it described as such in the inventory because of its resemblance to a salt? Despite these and other unanswered questions, the Royal Clock Salt remains a very significant national treasure, not only in its English context, but as an important European relic, showing the court of Henry VIII to be a European court in England.

All the chapters are well supported by endnotes, but these would have been much more accessible as footnotes. One has to either keep flipping backwards and forwards between the notes and text (two bookmarks required), or wait until the end of the chapters when one has generally forgotten the text context of the notes. There is an extensive bibliography, useful index, and short details of all the contributors.

The publication is beautifully produced on very good quality paper that has allowed really superb reproduction of the stunning images, which abound. It is a slight disappointment that it is perfect bound: if stitched the pages would have opened flatter and this serious research work would prove to be more durable into the future.

The notes and the binding are, however, minor quibbles in what can be enthusiastically recommended as a fascinatingly informative publication on not just the Royal Clock Salt itself, but on the whole area of splendid Renaissance metalwork. It is, like all good research literature, far from the last word on its subject. There remains much to be unearthed about the Royal Clock Salt.

***Nigel Israel FSA FGA DGA***