SCULPTURED SILVER OF THE RENAISSANCE

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The vitality, the richness of imagination, and the dramatic force that characterize Italian renaissance sculpture as a whole are reflected in the small half-figures of two satyrs and a nymph which form the handles of a silver knife, fork, and spoon recently bought by the Museum. Sharing the enthusiasm of his time for pagan legend, the goldsmith has chosen to portray these denizens of the woods and fields and has modeled them with the vigor and breadth of treatment usually associated with larger sculptures. The face of one satyr is drawn with demonic frenzy, while the other grimaces slyly as he devours a fig. The graceful languor of the nymph provides a sharp contrast to their wild energy. Masks, volutes, fruit, and festoons of drapery compose a shaft of ornament out of which the figures spring.

As Castiglione’s Courtier summarized the virtues of the ideal gentleman of the Renaissance, his learning, and wide culture, so does this set of knife, fork, and spoon epitomize the refinement of table manners which developed in Italy at this period. Long before this time knives and spoons had been part of dining equipment, but forks were late in appearing and came into favor first in Italy. An English traveler, Thomas Coryat, in 1611 reported on this novelty: “I observed a custome in all those Italian Cities and Townes through which I passed, that is not used in any other country that I saw in my travels. . . . The Italian, and also most strangers that are comnon in Italy, doe alwaies, at their meales use a little forke when they cut the meate.”

In the sixteenth century, however, forks were a luxury indulged in chiefly by the rich and so were designed by leading goldsmiths of the day with the utmost imagination and skill. The handles were usually made of precious or rare materials, such as gold, silver, ivory, or crystal. The knife, fork, and spoon here illustrated were clearly not intended for ordinary use but rather for ceremonial occasions. Perhaps they were a gift presented to some important personage. Even in the sixteenth century they must have excited wonder and admiration. Today such a set is extraordinarily rare; it may indeed be unique.

It is impossible to establish beyond any doubt the identity of the goldsmith who fashioned this superb courat. It has in the past, however, been attributed to Antonio Gentili da Faenza (died 1609), a goldsmith and sculptor of recognized ability who was active in Rome in the second half of the sixteenth century. His best-known works are a silver-gilt cross and pair of candlesticks made in
1581 for Cardinal Alessandro Farnese. On the basis of similarities between figures on these ecclesiastical pieces and those on the knife, fork, and spoon, the latter have been ascribed to Gentili. Added evidence tending to support this attribution is afforded by a contemporary ink drawing, inscribed Antonio da Faenza, which the Museum acquired with the silver. It has not
as yet been possible to determine whether this is Gentili’s signature or a notation by another hand, since no authenticated signature of the goldsmith is available for comparison. But, in any case, the designs of the three-tined fork and the spoon with satyr handle in the drawing show close similarities to those of the silver. In the instance of the spoon, the resemblance is so striking that it is difficult not to believe that we have here the original design for the Museum’s spoon. There are minor variations, but these are differences that one would expect to find between an artist’s free-hand sketch and the finished piece, cast and delicately chased by the skillful manipulation of the goldsmith’s tools. Whoever the creator of this set may have been, it is one of the most brilliant achievements of its kind that has survived to the present day.