A MAGNIFICENT GIFT OF LAMERIE SILVER

BY CARL C. DAUTERMAN
Associate Curator of Post-Renaissance Art

The name of Paul de Lamerie enjoys a preeminence among silversmiths matching that of Robert Adam among architects. A dramatic reunion of these great names has recently been effected at the Museum. Here, in Adam’s dining room from Lansdowne House, the tables are now graced with a princely array of the silver of Paul de Lamerie, set out as for a banquet. This collection, which notably enriches the Museum’s representation of Georgian silver, comes to the Museum as the munificent gift of Mrs. Widener Dixon and George D. Widener. In quality and extent this gleaming equipage is admirably in accord with its setting and suggests the expectant atmosphere of a great Georgian room in the hush preceding the entrance of eminent guests. The installation also conveys the impression of “heirloom” silver which, antedating somewhat the room itself, has been continued in use because of its superb quality and the acknowledged supremacy of its maker among eighteenth-century silversmiths. The arrangement is much as Mrs. Dixon and Mr. Widener knew it in the home of their mother, Eleanor Elkins Rice, whose collection included this silver and in whose memory this gift has been made.

Some will wonder at the intrusion of a seemingly French master into this English environment. Lamerie’s French name and his identification with rococo design are perhaps misleading; although of French antecedents, it should be said at once that there appears to be no evidence that he ever set foot on the soil of France. In these respects he was by no means unique; he belonged to one of the many Huguenot families which, after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, became France’s loss and England’s gain. His emigré father first moved to Holland, where he served for a while in the army of William III of Orange, and it was in that country that Paul was born. The Walloon church of Bois-le-Duc (s Hertogenbosch) preserves the record of baptism on April 14, 1688, of Paul Jaques, son of Paul Souchay de la Merie and Constance le Roux. The family removed to London, however, before the child’s first birthday. There they fell upon lean years, and the father, a member of the petty nobility, arranged to have Paul naturalized at the age of fifteen. This made it possible to apprentice him to a fellow expatriate and Huguenot, Peter Platel. Goldsmithing (working in silver and gold) was one of the few occupations regarded as acceptable to a person of his status.

English he became, but French he remained—in his childhood home, during his seven years of apprenticeship under a Huguenot, and no less in his married life with Louise Juliott. There is strong evidence that he kept himself acutely alert to developments among his French contemporaries across the Channel. Out of such a background it is but natural to expect a master craftsman perfectly attuned to the potentialities of French invention in design.

The Lamerie silver in the present collection comprises a silver-gilt dessert service of twenty-
The Lansdowne dining room with its new display of English silver by Paul de Lamerie (1688-1751), arranged as for a banquet. The silver was given by Mrs. Widener Dixon and George D. Widener. The carpet, also recently acquired, is described in the article on page 204.
One of a pair of sauceboats, 1719/20, and two saltcellars from a set of four, about 1735. The sauceboats are typical of the sturdy forms of Britannia silver, which is richer in silver content than the sterling grade.

four pieces, fifty other major items, and some additional flatware. An examination of the collection in chronological order reveals the broad scope of Lamerie’s work from 1719 (seven years after the completion of his apprenticeship) until 1749, two years before his death. This was an excitingly shifting period of design in England, one which began in the vein of the Queen Anne style and yielded gradually to the continental influences that enriched the silver of the early Georgian age. The new acquisitions illustrate the progression of Lamerie from the austerity of the Queen Anne style through the early Georgian phases with their successive influences of Louis XIV classicism and Régence experimentalism to the fullest exuberance of the rococo in England.

A pair of double-spouted sauceboats dating 1719/20 displays the baroque robustness and low center of gravity characteristic of the period of George I. The ornamentation, like the form itself, is restrained but not severe. Such a combination marks the tendency toward simplicity which was inherited from the opening years of the century and continued to hold its own successfully, in spite of the growing popularity of more elaborate shapes and decoration. Already at this stage Lamerie’s work reveals his preoccupation with molded ornament and boldly shaped contours which arrest the eye with scattered highlights.

In delightful contrast to the solidity of the sauceboats is a pair of circular breadbaskets of 1729/30, notable for the simulation of openwork weaving. Here a simple form, resulting from the dictates of a humble material, has been interpreted, but not copied, with all the glamour of a precious metal and without condescending to the techniques of basketry. The apparently plaited walls are not woven of strips of metal but are produced from a solid sheet pierced with diamond openings; the rim is similarly illusionistic. The effect owes much to the use of fine striations which accentuate the over-and-under impression of the diagonals and serve the further purpose of leading the eye irresistibly to the engraved center, then out again and around the rim to the cored handles. In this transit, a pleasing variety of textures is enjoyed, culminating in the gemlike engraving of the arabesques and trellises which frame the coat of arms. It may be remarked that this engraving is in the baroque vein employed by William Hogarth in designing for his friend Paul the Lamerie bookplate and coat of arms. It will also be recalled that Hogarth’s earliest work as an engraver was executed on silver.

An imposing centerpiece of 1733/34 shows a remarkable affinity to French argenterie. Indeed, the decoration is not without precedent in Paris, even to the medallioned portrait heads, which are found in the work of Besnier and his contemporaries during the late 1720’s. It is interest-
ing to observe that in his earlier leanings toward ornamentation Lamerie drew upon French classicism as enthusiastically as he improvised upon the French rococo during the second half of his career. We are so prone to regard the name of Lamerie as synonymous with the rococo in England that we tend to discount the prominence he must have enjoyed in the pre-rococo idioms which filled half of his working years. How else can we credit his receiving a commission from the Czar in the middle 1720’s?

At least one earlier Lamerie centerpiece of comparable design is known. It dates from 1719/20 and was in the collection of the Duke of Sutherland, where it was regarded as a wine cistern or cleansing vessel. Lacking a cover of any kind, it is somewhat more elementary than the present piece. One cannot but speculate that the Museum’s example, which is equipped with a concave cover and eight matching dishes, in turn continues the evolution toward the fully developed epergne with central bowl and attached arms. Our accessory dishes, four oval and four round, stand on four scrolled supports and are intended to be disposed about the larger vessel to form a surtoute de table.

The principal vessel of this garniture illustrates Lamerie’s innate feeling for sumptuous decorative effects. He combines here a wide diversity of design with an exceptional technical ingenuity, cloaking an intricately wrought form in a combination of motives which are variously cast, chased, embossed, and engraved. The cover is especially noteworthy in that it employs relief, in the form of female masks centered in leaffmantled shells. The desire here is to heighten the interest by emphasizing the third dimension in the ornament. The total effect is impressive in the courtly manner of Louis XIV. The female heads adorning the ends of the oval body are counterparts of the mascarons in bronze doré which appear on so many of the early eighteenth-century French commodes and table legs. A point of distinction, however, is that Lamerie prefers to affix these devices to the most prominent convex curves, rather than to place them
in the overhanging shelter of concave surfaces, as is so often the case in furniture design.

To the same phase of his work belong six sturdy casters for sugar and pepper, forming two sets. These and the centerpiece just referred to are the earliest examples (1733/34) in the collection to illustrate this maker’s adoption of the sterling grade of silver, which became available again to goldsmiths with the revocation of the silver currency controls in 1719. For a dozen years beyond the required time Lamerie had continued to work almost exclusively in silver of Britannia quality, in which he had been trained. This was close to the French metal in containing a higher percentage of silver. It may be that he preferred it or that his patrons, who during the twenties included royalty, demanded the richer and more exclusive standard. In any event, he long exercised his option of using Britannia silver.

That he continued to cling to the robust forms associated with Britannia silver is illustrated by these sterling silver casters. Although made in 1733, their style is retarded. In their form and proportions they approximate some of Lamerie’s
One of six matching casters forming two sets, 1733/34. They were used for sugar and pepper. These casters and the centerpiece illustrated on page 197 are the earliest examples of sterling silver in the collection.

earliest pieces. Though vastly effective, their strapwork appliqués and lacy ajouré panels are neither new nor especially individualistic. Their prototypes existed in France before the turn of the century. What is significant, however, is the presence of delicately engraved panels of diapering from which emanate leafy scrolls violating the strict symmetry of all the other ornament. The same motive appears in the cover and the loose dishes of the preceding centerpiece. It is this element of daring, this departure from rigid balance, that sets the keynote for so much of this master's work after the early 1730's. It is a symptom of his predilection for the swirling line of the rococo, which was soon to overtake English silver and in which he was to excel.

A set of four circular salts of about 1735 reflects a timely concern with animal forms in that their lions' feet curve out from beneath the shaggy masks of particularly British-looking lions, as on the walnut chairs of the same period.

The close of his transitional period is marked by Lamerie's great epergne (1738/39), in which the stylistic reticence of the vessel itself is relaxed by the introduction of freely flowing palm leaves in repoussé. These leaves flank a smiling head of Mercury and supersede the classical formalism of a medallion or other rigid frame. In the same manner the valanced border of the dish-form cover is molded with splashes of coquillage and other ornament in bold and nervous relief. The sweeping curves of the detachable arms add a dancing quality to the whole which accords favorably with the growing sense of movement in the now strengthening current of the rococo. The arms here are those of Carrington on the central dish and of Capel-Coningsby on the surrounding dishes.

Among the pieces here displayed the first full surge of the rococo is evidenced in a precious tripod creamer of 1738/39. Its jaunty lines, its diminutive scale, and its touches of asymmetrical ornament bespeak the light-hearted flippancy of a new social attitude. Here Lamerie reasserts his fondness for punctuating the roundness of swelling surfaces with clustered motives in low relief. He still uses the shell, but it is a very differently shaped shell from the stilted and naturalistic forms of earlier usage. It is an old friend in new guise and carries the pleasant surprise of a profound remark expressed wittily. Its companion motives are in full accord. Blended into the design is a minor grotesque note which fits Lamerie's formula of rewarding those who look closely at his work. In this instance it is assigned to the handle and takes the form of the osseous head.
Large tray, 1741/42. A comparable example is in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. BELOW: Detail, showing bracket foot of tray. The lions’ heads on all four feet face in the same direction, illustrating the use of cast parts.

of a bird, whose long pendent tongue provides the loop which constitutes the rest of the handle.

The great salver, twenty-five inches long, is another example of the increased manipulation of the borders observed earlier in the epergne. The shape, an oblong with rounded ends and indented corners, was used by Lamerie as early as 1720. The scrolled bracket feet represent typical details of this maker’s fantasy: they terminate in jowly lions’ heads which rest upon stubby outstretched forelegs. The center of the tray features the Irish arms of Westenra quartering Cairnes, enclosed by concentric borders of pulsating rocaillle and shellwork, characteristic of work of its date, 1741/42. The entire tray is instinct with life.

Representing the same year is a set of seven shell-handled “venison dishes” displaying a fine sense of balance between considerations of beauty and utility. The dishes occur in four evenly graduated sizes ranging from fourteen to twenty inches. In each, the plain center provides a perfect foil for the serpentine lobes of the border with its rim of handsomely scaled gadroons and its two magnificent scallop handles. The arms, a later addition, are those of Sir Rich-
Cream pitcher, 1738/39, showing the fine proportions and detail typical of Lamerie's rococo work

ard Wallace, M. P., of Sudbourne Hall, Suffolk, whose renowned collection was given to Great Britain by his widow. The admirable sense of proportion and contrast here expressed has made this design one of Lamerie's most popular, which was kept alive by other English hands when, after the master's death, his molds were sold to his fellow craftsmen.

The full flowering of Lamerie's talent for the rococo is found in his spanking kettle-on-stand of 1744/45. Its shape strikes a note of audacity which is echoed by the bizarrerie of the relief ornament, in which not less than eighteen different motives are employed. On the cover appear scattered shells and scrolls which offer scant foothold to two salamanders seeking the leafy retreat of a berry spray which forms the finial. At the spring of the handle two tiny snails erect their heads in curiosity—and well they may, over the remaining ornament of the kettle.

The expanding shoulder of this vessel is effectively filled with a repeated panoply of exotic motives, enveloping a coat of arms. These motives include, besides the usual equipment of the rocailleur, a lion's mask, a leaning palm tree, and the scowling face of a puffy-cheeked boy, which is virtually a signature of this goldsmith.

The stand is equally a morceau de fantaisie, into which have been incorporated two types of masks alternating with four defiant eagles in the full round, attached by their outspread wings and reminiscent of the gilded consoles which are so typical of early Georgian furniture.

In the hands of a lesser artist such a mélange of subjects would have bogged down hopelessly, if indeed it could have been attempted at all. Yet Lamerie has carried it off with consummate success. His feeling for modeling led him to seize upon the ballooning shoulder of the kettle as the ideal place for embossing his great cartouches. It is precisely here that the largest highlights always concentrate. Then why not create the principal relief just there, to break up the light into delightful patterns? The result of his daring is in itself a justification of the inverted pear shape, which has so often been criticized for its seeming instability.

It is amply evident in this collection, and particularly in this kettle-on-stand, that to Paul de Lamerie silver had an irresistible tactile appeal, which he exploited in terms of all the techniques known to the maker of plate. In a characteristically English way he used a combination of repoussé with chasing. Whereas in France the chasing tends to take precedence, in England it is the repoussé work which receives the stronger emphasis.

His regard for silver as a sculptor's medium is forcefully shown in the pair of tall candelabra dating from 1747/48. These have the weight and substance of cast forms. The dominant feature here is the half-figure of Bacchus in Atlantean pose, rising above a baluster entwined with vines and supporting upon his head a vessel overflowing with grapes. This is surmounted in turn by swirling shell scrolls and three branching arms which terminate in caryatids, each balancing a bobèche. Here is Lamerie at his most ebullient. Every inch of the surface is made to express the plasticity of his medium. It attests the vigor which remained his until the close of his long and richly productive career.

The remaining Lamerie pieces, which make their contribution to the glittering effect of our Lansdowne Room installation, include six round and four octagonal plates dating 1738-1746, a
Kettle-on-stand, 1744/45. A broad-shouldered form related to Chinese porcelain, interpreted in the spirit of the French rococo and emphasizing the “repoussé” technique, which was popular in England.
Pair of three-light candelabra, with Bacchus and caryatids, dating from 1747/48, near the end of Lamerie’s life. An obituary spoke of his fame in making fine ornamental plate and praised his role in “Bringing that Branch of the Trade to the Perfection it is now in.”
One of seven shell-handled dishes in four sizes, 1741/42. They bear the arms of Sir Richard Wallace, M. P.

sweetmeat dish of 1742/43, an ajoure cake basket of 1744/45, and a pair of cruet frames of 1749/50, fitted with cut-glass bottles.

The Lamerie account does not yet end; the gift is accompanied by an example of the work of his master, Peter Platel—a tazza with gadrooned rim and cut-card ornament, dating from 1710. The year is significant in that it falls within the period of Lamerie’s apprenticeship and adds one more strong indication of the French influences which helped to shape Platel’s most illustrious pupil.

This extraordinary gift increases the Museum’s collection of Lamerie silver to more than one hundred pieces and brings the representation of his work into an admirable balance, especially in terms of the oeuvre of his earlier years, where a great deficiency had existed. Paul de Lamerie was a contemporary of Grinling Gibbons, William Kent, and Matthias Lock, who achieved richly decorative effects in woodcarving, architecture, and furniture design. Together they illustrate an axiom of European eighteenth-century design: that new trends tend to become exaggerated in countries which adopt them and tend to linger longer in their foster homes than in the country of their origin.

It is important to acknowledge here one other notable piece of English silver received as part of the above gift. This is a punch bowl with chinoiserie decoration, which will be the subject of a separate article.

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