The Legacy of a Fantastical Scot

by JESSIE McNAB Curatorial Assistant, Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Art

Wine bottles and serving flagons, cooling half-immersed in a freestanding cistern of iced water, are common in European paintings from the later Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. The sight of these cisterns assures us that then, as now, some wines were preferred cold. This preference illumines the manner, seen in many genre pictures and clearly habitual, of holding a wineglass by the base between thumb and forefinger (Figure 1); it seems both uncomfortable and precarious, but it did keep the glass from being affected by the warmth of the hand.

Two new vessels for ensuring cool wine above-stairs appeared in England in the late seventeenth century and, becoming known on the Continent soon after their introduction, enjoyed a continuous development of more than two hundred years without, however, entirely supplanting the earlier and more cumbrous wine cistern. These were the ice bucket and the chilling bowl, both introduced by London silversmiths at a time auspicious for the adoption of new models. After the Restoration, the court and nobility developed a taste for lavish silver in furnishings, and among the other classes also there was an increased demand for silver vessels, especially those associated with drinking.

It is with the chilling bowl only that we are here concerned—the vessel known to us as the monteith. The earliest written reference to such an object is by Anthony à Wood, the Oxford antiquarian, whose best memorial is his own meticulous History of the University of Oxford. Of more general interest is his autobiography and journal which covered the years from 1632 to 1695, when he died at the age of sixty-five. These writings were first published between 1891 and 1900. Far from being a subjective and private document, this series of miscellaneous and often indiscreet jottings form an abundant record of the external contemporary world and whatever was new, changing, uncommon, or newsworthy in it. In 1651 Wood noted the double novelty of a coffeehouse “kept by Jacob, a Jew . . . at the Angel in the Parish of Saint Peter in the East Oxen,” and in 1681 the new self-turning spit intrigued him. Snippets of secondhand information were also recorded, as in 1670, “Captain Timothy Wilkins told me that Archbishop Spalato was the first that made a balconny in England, being the backside of the Savoy (of which he was Master) towards the Thames.”

New medicines as he or his family swallowed
them were duly described, as were changes in diet: the decline in the use of spices in the 1680s, and, in 1667, the growing consumption of brandy “since this warr began with the Dutch.” Wakes, storms, rumors, gossip and disasters, portentous national events, and reverberating college scandals were recorded with all the relish of an inquisitive observer. Anthony’s reserved and critical nature set him apart from all but a few friends, and early in life he began to go deaf, a misfortune that increased his isolation. Among the few personal notes in the diary are splenetic outbursts against the vagaries of fashionable contemporaries—their clothes, “a strange effeminate age,” their speech, “the way of bantering,” and of course their endless political intriguing. Such passages afford us a picture of Restoration life and manners which Anthony would neither understand nor ignore.

In December 1683 he wrote: “This yeare in the summer time came up a vessel or bason notched at the brims to let drinking glasses hang there by the foot so that the body or drinking place might stand in the water to cool them. Such a bason was called a ‘Monteigh’ from a fantastical Scot called ‘Monsieur Monteigh’ who at that time or a little before wore the bottoms of his cloake or coate so notched U U U U.” The “fantastical Scot” has never been satisfactorily identified, although Pepys had celebrated the King’s birthday in 1668, singing in the company of a Mr. Monteith, “a handsome young swaggering gentleman [with] a good basse but used to sing only tavern songs,” with whom sartorial particularity would not seem incompatible. At all events the name “monteith” for a chilling bowl was no mere invention of the Oxford gossips, for it occurs on one belonging to the Corporation of Newark on Trent: “This Munteth and Thirteen Cuppes Given by the Honourable Nicholas
Saunderson to the Corporation of Newark Anno Dom. 1689 Mr. Clarke, Mayor." The belief that the chilling bowl was named after a particular person is also independently supported by a couplet in King's poem "The Art of Cookery," published in 1707:

New things produce new words and thus
Monteith
Has by one vessel saved himself from Death

The 1721 edition of Nathan Bailey's *Household Dictionary* is the first of the early lexicons to include the word monteith. There it is defined as "a scallopt bason to cool glasses in." Dr. Johnson, who used Bailey's dictionary as the basis for his own, published in 1755, probably commemo- rated a current use of the monteith when he defined it as a vessel in which to wash glasses. It is of course hardly surprising that so commodious a shape should acquire additional functions. The monteiths which survive today are used as punch bowls, rose bowls, or simply as display pieces for grand occasions.

There is no support for the view often expressed in the present century that the monteith is no more than a punch bowl adapted to steady a set of glasses being carried in it to table. On the contrary, the evidence rather suggests that the familiar covered posset pots were originally used for containing several kinds of mixed drink, including punch, which grew steadily in popularity from the 1640s; punch only acquired a vessel peculiar to itself shortly after the introduc- tion of the monteith, probably for the same general reasons that favored the latter's adoption. The monteith's connection with punch is nevertheless an early one, for by the mid-1680s monteiths were made with detachable notched rims so that they might serve as punch bowls when their "collers" were removed. A particularly handsome monteith of this type belonged to Lord Mostyn and was provided with a small juglike dipper to match, for use on punch occasions.

No monteith as early as the one recorded by Anthony à Wood is known. The earliest date- mark found on surviving monteiths is for 1684/85. One so marked belongs to Kings College, Cambridge; another is in the Worcester Mu- seum. (Earlier dates have been claimed for the monteiths belonging to the Drapers' Company and the Salters' Company, but these are now known to date from 1685 and 1716 respectively.) Relatively few seventeenth century models have been preserved. Some silver monteiths have found their way to America, two of them in recent years to the Metropolitan, where they make an unusually interesting group with two other early monteiths, one of glass and the other of porcelain.

The Museum was extremely fortunate to ac- quire, with the Widener gift of English silver in 1958, an imposing monteith dated 1686/87, made by the unidentified maker I.S. (Figure 2). In dimensions as well as decoration it is more than typical of its period. Monteiths of the 1680s often had, in addition to the characteristic sectioning of the bowl, one or two other features such as handles depending from masks, wires or leaf molding strengthening the rim, flat-chased decoration alternating with matted work, and armorials; but only one or two others have so far been traced that combine all these embellish- ments, as does ours. Flat-chased chinoiseries, as shown on our monteith, were not uncommon on English silver between about 1675 and 1695. The designs of all these chinoiseries have a strong resemblance, as though the chasers were interpret- ing a common source such as oriental lac- quers or Chinese porcelain; there is, however, much inequality in the skill of execution. The alert little people inhabiting the panels of our monteith are delineated with a verve and competence rarely bestowed on chasing of this period. They are the first representatives of the silver chinoiserie style to enter our collections.

Also in 1958, Irwin Untermeyer gave the Mu- seum its second silver monteith (Figure 3), a fine example by the unidentified silversmith C. O. dated 1695/96. It offers an interesting contrast with the Widener monteith just described. The strongly cored trumpet-shaped decoration is an elaborate treatment of a motif peculiar to monteiths of the 1690s which, except for revivals, did not survive much beyond the decade. The earlier form was delineated by a single groove, which in- vites one to surmise that it developed from the vertical grooves of the 1680s. When chinoiseries were dropped as unfashionable in the early 1690s, the lines dividing the sections on the
monteiths relaxed from the rigidity imposed on them by their function as frames, and by joining and curving fell into a design susceptible of decorative treatment. The flowing rim of this monteith exhibits a typical softening of the severe notched rim of the earlier models, and is closely in sympathy with the rhythmic quality of its main decoration. The arms on the monteith are those of John Hoo, a serjeant-at-law in the time of George II. The powerful order of serjeants-at-law is now extinct, but for six hundred years, at least, the judges of the King’s Bench and Court of Common Pleas were always members of the order, and in other ways enjoyed a very valuable monopoly of practice. Since membership in the order also bestowed a precedence, after knights bachelor and before Companions of the Bath, John Hoo would have been a prominent man in his time both socially and professionally.

A glass monteith (see Cover) was bequeathed to the Museum in 1943 by Mrs. Florence Ellsworth Wilson. It is a documentary piece of unique importance, since it is dated 1700 and bears the arms of its original owners, William and Mary Gibbs, for whose marriage it was probably made. Moreover, although glass punch bowls and posset pots of comparable age are known, which were challenging enough to the skill of the glass blower, this is the only recorded glass monteith. It is modeled on silver examples of a slightly earlier date, with a straight rim with simple cutout notches and a bowl divided into panels. The decoration is carried out in diamond engraving. The armorials already noted are in

Fig. 3. Silver monteith by the smith C. O. English, 1695/96. Height 7 3/4 inches
Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1958
Fig. 4. Detail of the China-trade porcelain monteith shown on the cover
one panel; another shows a music party. The other four panels are decorated with country scenes probably drawn from Horsley Park, the bride’s new home; the house is portrayed with lawns and flower beds before it, and tame birds preening themselves beside a lake, while loaded harvest carts make their way toward the grange. Pious exhortations in a variety of modern and ancient tongues occur between the notches of the rim.

Scarcely less unusual than the glass monteith is the porcelain example (see Cover) received last year as an addition to the Helena Woolworth McCann Collection from the Winfield Foundation. It was made and decorated in China for the Western market, by workers who were of course unfamiliar with the purpose of such a vessel and in whose hands the functional aspect of the rim has suffered some modification. It is perhaps the earliest example of China-trade porcelain in the McCann Collection, its combination of European outline and Kang H’si (1644-1722) decoration dating it between 1685 and 1700. The organization and execution of the design will bear comparison with porcelain made in China for the home market. The central blue-on-white motif (Figure 7) of the inner area of the bowl is a classical Chinese flower arrangement flanked by an incense burner, a waterpot and other vessels, scrolls, and fruit. The outer surface has a vibrant blue ground that varies in the intensity of its color by virtue of the “pointillist” manner of its application. It is relieved by a dazzling scheme of alternating white-on-blue, blue-on-white motifs such as cloud bands, trailing stems, chrysanthemums, and hexagons containing mythical creatures.

The four early monteiths just described were clearly the property of persons of means. However, more modest examples dating from 1700 and even earlier have survived and indicate that the custom of chilling wineglasses was taken up to some degree by classes in England other than the most affluent. Some of the materials used for these humbler monteiths were walnut, lignum

Figs. 5, 6. Details of the glass monteith shown on the cover
vitae, pewter, and, in the eighteenth century, tole, earthenware, and delftware.

An alternative method of chilling wineglasses was developed during the second quarter of the eighteenth century: individual coolers were placed before each person's place at table (Figure 8). This type of cooler, a pair of which is in the Museum's collection, seems to have been made exclusively in glass. The new arrangement was fully accepted by 1761, for in that year the tables were set with individual coolers at the customary banquet in Westminster Hall following the coronation of George III. The use of such coolers continued well into the nineteenth century. They did not, however, quite usurp the place of the silver monteith, which continued to be ordered in the old style, albeit in diminishing numbers, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially by the livery companies, college foundations, and similar bodies where old customs die hard. In the later eighteenth century some oval monteiths were made, resembling the French verrières in form, and the manufacturers of plated silver introduced many new designs (Figure 11), keeping in step with contemporary ideas. It was in fact these manufacturers who kept the monteith alive in England in the nineteenth century; monteiths did not disappear from their catalogues until the first decade of the present century.

In the early eighteenth century chilling bowls appeared in continental Europe. They resembled the English models and were probably introduced by way of Holland, which during the reign of William and Mary (1688-1702) was more closely connected with England than was any other European nation. A splendid Dutch silver monteith was in the Russian Imperial Collection, and another very handsome Dutch one dated 1704 is in the collection of Baron W. F. T. Pallandt. A fine Dutch delftware monteith of the early eighteenth century is exhibited at the restored Van Cortlandt manor in Tarrytown. Pewter monteiths were made in Holland well into the nineteenth century with little change in the form.

Apart from the Dutch monteith already noted, the Russian Imperial Collection contained a fine example made by the Augsburg silversmith Johann Jacob Bruglocher in about 1700 as part

Fig. 7. View of the inside of the China-trade porcelain monteith shown on the cover

Fig. 8. Double-spouted glass cooler for individual use. English, xviii century. Height 3½ inches
Bequest of Mrs. Maria P. James, 1911
Fig. 9. Meillonas faïence verrière. French, about 1770. Height 4¾ inches
Gift of R. Thornton Wilson in memory of Florence Ellsworth Wilson, 1950

Fig. 10. Sèvres porcelain verrière. French, about 1780. Height 5 inches
Bequest of Emma Townsend Gary, 1937
of the Riga service, and also an English monteith by Gabriel Sleath dated 1710 that for many years was used in the annual ceremony of blessing the Volga. Böttger made a monteith in his red stoneware and a monteith was included in the celebrated service made at the Meissen factory between 1737 and 1741 for Count Brühl.

In France verrières, as they were called, do not seem to have been made in any quantity until about the 1760s. They were oval and much more shallow than the English models, with decorative lugs and a simple serpentine rim. They were frequently, along with matching ice buckets, part of a large dinner service. A Meillonas faience verrière that was given by R. Thornton Wilson (Figure 9) and one in Sèvres porcelain in the Gary bequest (Figure 10) are examples of this development. The French type was widely imitated on the continent of Europe and in England, where they were made both at the Derby and Wedgwood factories.

In colonial America monteiths were certainly known, although few have been preserved to the present day. Families in the South obtained most of their silver from London; the Garlick family of Virginia still owns a monteith made by Francis Spilsberg in 1733. The Northern colonies produced American-born silversmiths in the late seventeenth century, and one of these, John Coney of Boston, made at least two monteiths that still survive. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century John Letelier of Philadelphia and Daniel Henchman each made a monteith still in existence today, and no doubt others now lost. Since Wedgwood had a considerable market in America, it is likely that some of his creamware verrières in the French manner were exported to this country. One at least came over with the dinner service thought to have been ordered for the personal use of Robert Morris when he was Agent of Marine; it is decorated with the arms of the Continental Navy. It passed into the Oster Collection in 1947.

The preservation of monteiths in public collections here and abroad seems to have started a reintroduction of the form without reviving its function. Modern ceramic and glass bowls of monteith shape may be found as decorators’ items, and although it is a pity that the monteith survives only in this “relegated” role, its use in our streamlined age affirms its fundamental soundness of design.

Figure 11. Illustration showing a monteith, from a manufacturer’s catalogue of Sheffield plate. English, later XVIII or early XIX century. 6 x 8 inches
Dick Fund, 1936