Among the German silver of the sixteenth century exhibited in our galleries is a curious drinking cup in the shape of an elaborately dressed female figure. This cup was intended for the amusement of dinner guests, but removed from the atmosphere of convivial gaiety, as it is now, the lighthearted mood to which the cup once contributed can be recaptured only through an inquiry into its origins.

Such drinking vessels originated in Germany during the last quarter of the sixteenth century within the Nuremberg circle of the Jamnitzer family of goldsmiths. Their gay character has suggested various descriptive names; “wager cup” is applied to those that, in addition to the larger bowl formed by the voluminous skirt, are fitted with another, smaller, one pivoted between the maiden’s raised hands. The name refers to the custom of filling the larger and smaller bowls at the same time and offering them to guests who competed in draining both without spilling the wine. This must have been a most difficult task indeed, particularly after the enjoyment of wine had unsteadied the hands of the contestants. Occasionally, wager cups are referred to as marriage cups, in which case the larger bowl was reserved for the groom and the smaller one for the bride. In Germany, whether made with one bowl or two, they are generally known as Jungfrauenbecher, or maiden cups.

The Museum’s silver-gilt cup (Figure 1) represents a lady in Venetian costume, with face, neck, and hands covered by flesh-colored enamel. Her hair is dressed in curls that rise like horns above her forehead, following a Venetian fashion introduced after 1580. A stiff lace collar encircles the V-shaped décolletage of her bodice, and the ample skirt is patterned with floral scrollwork to simulate Venetian brocade. The smaller bowl between her hands, by contrast, is left entirely plain.

The cup bears the marks of the city of Augsburg (a pine cone) and of the maker IH or HI, whose identity has not yet been convincingly established. Marc Rosenberg, who first published these marks in 1921, suggested the name of Joerg Hainler, who died in 1624, whereas Helmut Seling, who is preparing a major work on the goldsmiths of Augsburg, proposes that of Hieronimus Imhof, a native of Bamberg but active in Augsburg, where he married in 1620. The same maker’s mark recurs on a similar wager cup (Figure 2) in the Austrian Museum of Applied Art in Vienna. On this cup the
THREE COSTUME ILLUSTRATIONS:

3. Woodcut by Christoph Krieger (died before 1590), German. 6½ x 4¼ inches. From Cesare Vecellio’s De gli Habiti Antichi e Moderni di Diverse Parti del Mondo (Venice, 1590). Rogers Fund, 21.36.146

4. Engraving by Theodore de Bry (1528-1598), Netherlandish. 4 x 3¾ inches. From Emblemata Saecularia (Frankfurt, 1593). Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich

5. Engraving by Giacomo Franco (1550-1620), Italian. 8⅞ x 7 inches. From Habiti delle Donne Venetiane intagliate in rame (Venice, 1610). Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 34.68
lady's coiffure and bodice differ, for they are treated less formally, and the small pivoted bowl, instead of being plain, is decorated to match the skirt.

These wager cups in the shape of maidens, who appear all dressed up for a festive occasion, were inspired by contemporary costume books. From the early sixteenth century on, goldsmiths and silversmiths depended heavily upon the graphic arts. They drew their ideas partly from book illustrations and partly from folios of ornamental engravings, especially created to fill their needs. These pattern books served the dual purpose of providing the goldsmiths with new designs and of allowing prospective customers to point out their preferences when placing a commission.

The design for the wager cup in the Museum may have been taken from a woodcut illustration (Figure 3) in Cesare Vecellio's De gli Habiti Antichi e Moderni di Diverse Parti del Mondo, published in Venice in 1590, or one of its later versions. Several printings attest to the extraordinary popularity of the book, and translations indicate how far that popularity extended. The original illustrations were designed by Vecellio himself, and the woodcuts were executed by "Christoforo Guerra Thedesco da Norimbergo, eccelentissimo intagliatore in legno." Cristoforo Guerra, or Christoph Krieger, of Nuremberg had settled in Venice about 1550, where he died shortly before Vecellio's book came off the press. This contribution by a south German engraver may have especially interested the Augsburg goldsmith in Vecellio's publication; even if he had missed the first edition, he could have seen illustrations based on Vecellio's in Theodore de Bry's Emblemata Saecularia (Figure 4), published in Frankfurt in 1593, or in Giacomo Franco's Habiti delle Donne Veneticane intagliate in rame (Figure 5), issued in Venice in 1610.

In Germany there always had been a tendency to favor foreign designs over domestic ones, for they evoked distant lands and romantic longings, but, on the other hand wager and maiden cups featuring German costume figures do exist. There is a charming

8. Design for a cup, by Paul Flindt (active 1601-1618), German. Engraving, 8¾ x 5¾ inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 37.40.5 (37)
cup at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (Figure 7), representing a Nuremberg lady, with a plumed hat and with gloves in hand. This figure shows a certain resemblance to Jost Amman’s woodcut illustrations in Theatrum Mulierum, published in Frankfurt in 1586, even though her bearing is more sophisticated and flirtatious than that of Amman’s German matrons. The plain apron and the ornamental detail on the skirt are similar to those of the engraved design for a cup by the Nuremberg goldsmith Paul Flindt (Figure 8), but Flindt’s cup is less articulated and lacking in feminine allure.

Engraved designs were usually printed in considerable numbers and, if necessary, could easily be replaced, unlike the individual drawings for which they were substituted; such preparatory sketches as did exist had only a remote chance of surviving the rough handling in busy workshops. This treatment may explain why no more than a single drawing for a wager cup has come to our attention: preserved at the Veste Coburg, it is attributed to another Augsburg goldsmith, Bernhard Vesenmaier. The drawing (Figure 9) features a German matron—whose generous shape provides for a capacious cup—in the elaborate costume of the early seventeenth century. The stoic expression on her face indicates indifference to or, perhaps, an unawareness of her fate, which was to be turned upside down and filled with wine, and then set aside after she had served her purpose.

The fashion for wager cups was short-lived in Germany, and did not extend beyond the middle of the seventeenth century. At that time similar cups, sometimes referred to as puzzle cups, were made in Holland, where the maiden’s portrait was replaced by a windmill, characteristic of the Dutch scene. These windmills could be set in motion by blowing air through a tube at the back, which also served as a support for little figures of a miller and his helpers. These cups provided the kind of entertainment that would seem to have belonged to those jovial drinking parties depicted in some of Jan Steen’s finest paintings.
Although wager cups made outside of Germany are rare, three English examples, of the Commonwealth period, are known to survive. One of these (Figure 10) belongs to the Worshipful Company of Vintners, London; a pair (Figure 11) is in the Irwin Untermyer Collection in New York. Because of their scarcity in England, I am inclined to think that the Untermyer cups were also originally owned by the Vintners' Company. Every liveryman of the Vintners' Company was required to drink to the prosperity of the company from the larger cup, and the health of the master vintner from the smaller—without wasting a drop. All three cups have only maker's marks: that of the Vintners' Company shows the letters TA, with two mullets between them, those in the Untermyer collection the monogram IA. They were undoubtedly made in London, but any documentation of their origin was probably destroyed during the Great Fire of 1666 when all records of Goldsmiths' Hall were lost. Although based on German prototypes, these English cups are of an entirely different character. They display a new simplicity of form and of dress. The overskirt of each figure is tied back, exposing a plain skirt and long apron instead of the sumptuously patterned skirt of the earlier German cups. The English maiden's simple bodice is laced up the front. Her straight hair is partially concealed beneath a bonnet with scalloped edges, which match those around the collar and cuffs of her long gloves. This modest outfit resembles those seen in the English costume engravings Ornatus Muliebris Anglicus (Figure 12), by Wenceslaus Hollar, published between 1640 and 1643. The unadorned bonnet, collar, and large apron are indicative of the Puritan outlook on life that was to result in a regime of overstrained morality. They also hint at rigid political and religious convictions, and complete intolerance of the frivolity of court society. Because of these guiding principles, the Puritan maidens on these cups have assumed an air of quiet respectability and innocence, of the kind that seventeenth-century poets found in English milkmaids.

At the Victoria and Albert Museum is a later wager cup (Figure 13), made in 1706 at Dublin, by Joseph Walker. The design of this cup follows the earlier English Commonwealth examples, and the maiden appears in the costume of that period. Subtle changes, however, have been introduced: the maiden now wears a rakish three-cornered hat, and the pattern of her crinoline is derived from Spitalfields silk. These touches mitigate the austerity of the earlier costume and allow the cupbearer to display feminine charm as her contribution to the pleasures of the table.

11. A pair of wager cups. Maker's marks: IA, conjoined. English, 1650-1660. Silver, heights 6⅞ inches. Inscribed around the rims of the bowls: When riches faile friends groe scant. No Gutt to unkindness no woe to want. Inscribed on the aprons: Hands of I pray you Handle not me/ For I am blind and you can see/ If you love me lend me not/ For fear of breaking bend me not. Collection of Irwin Untermyer, New York

OPPOSITE:


A small section of a Far Eastern gallery has been set aside to show twenty-five objects that have recently come under our roof—either by accession or loan. They form a diverse group, ranging geographically from India to China and Japan, and chronologically from the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) up to the eighteenth century. The following article discusses one of them, a handscroll depicting a spring festival, but each of these beautiful pieces is worth writing about, and each deserves a visit.

Photograph: Jerry Sarapochiello