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# A Latvian landmark

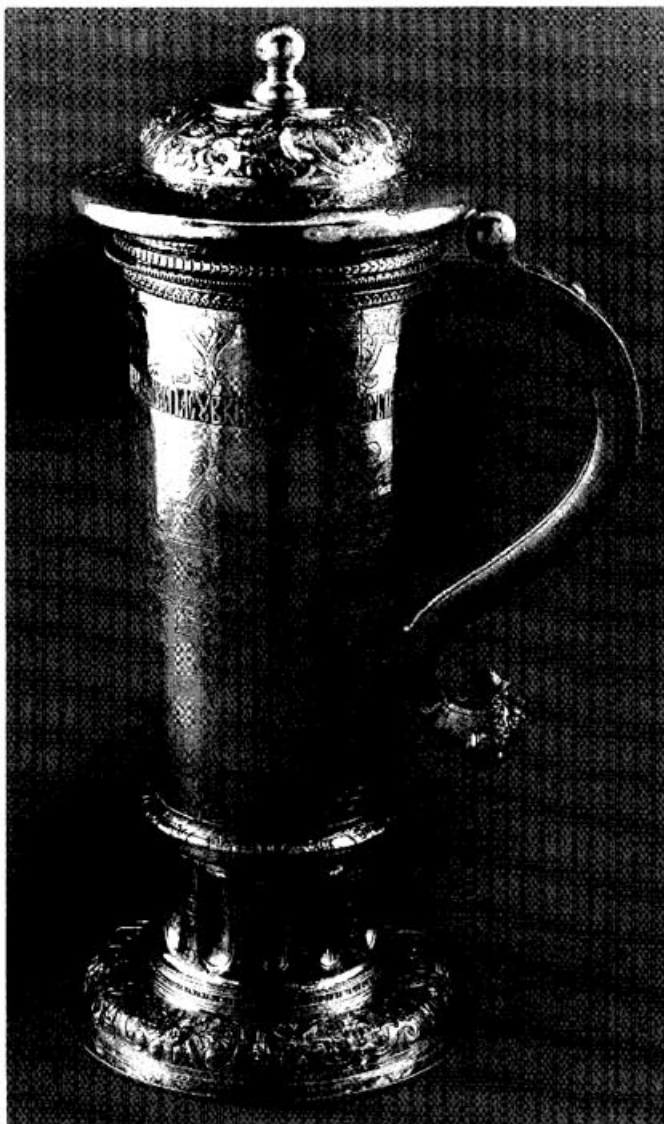
The golden age of Baltic silver

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In the bleak political climate of the Baltic Republic, when one is faced with daily queues even for a bar of soap, a major silver exhibition is a rare event. In spite of the fact that no catalogue could be published due to a paper shortage, the enthusiasm and sense of national identity that this exhibition aroused, amongst the organizers and the general public alike, provided a reminder of the former artistic glory of the Baltic Republics and goes some way to putting them back on the cultural map. The setting for the most comprehensive exhibition of Baltic silver ever held was the recently restored, impressive eighteenth-century palace of Rundale in Courland. This has a distinct St Petersburg feel to it, built to serve as a 138-room residence for the Duke of Courland, by the architect Bartolomeo Rastrelli who also built the Winter Palace and was appointed court architect to Tsarina Anna Ivanovna.

Rundale is not far from the Lithuanian border, but Lithuania does not constitute part of the original Baltic group. Originally the Baltic countries comprised Estland, Courland and Livonia, the latter being the name by which most of the region was referred to until the sixteenth century. The exhibition concentrated on silver from within the boundaries of what is now known as Latvia (Courland, Zemgale, and part of Livonia). No Estonian silver was included, despite the stylistic unity of the Baltic countries. Riga in Livland being the most fashionable city.

The golden age for Baltic silver started sometime in the fifteenth century, continued throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (allowing for some poorer periods during the wars) and went through some patchy but brilliant decades in the eighteenth century. To understand the silverware produced in the region it is necessary to look at its social and political background. During the thirteenth century a Christian order of Teutonic knights conquered Livonia from the local Finnish and Baltic tribes. When the Livonian confederation disintegrated, following the invasion by the Russians in the north and Lithuanians and Poles (Catholics) in the south, German influence remained in the form of clergymen,



1 Parcel-gilt *lunsekann* or *lunse tankard* by Hans Rolowes (1580–1602) the elder or the younger. Riga, second half of the sixteenth century. Height 30 cm, diameter 16.5 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum



2 Collection bag by Ewert Panck (1686–1707), made for St Katarina Church, Goldingen, 1693. Height 18 cm, diameter 12 cm. Riga Museum

craftsmen and merchants. Estonia became part of the Swedish Empire in 1561 and Livonia followed suit in 1629. Courland remained a dukedom under the Poles until 1795 when, like the rest of the region that had already done so, it succumbed to the Russians.

The earliest pieces in the exhibition are some typically Baltic silver brooches which date from the sixth century onwards. Similar brooches are still worn with traditional Latvian dress today. The first recorded Latvian master goldsmith does not appear until Johann Ribenisse in Riga in 1334. During the sixteenth century grain exports ensured the prosperity of the region, but membership of the Hanseatic League, with its administrative centre in Lübeck, meant that strict rules were enforced upon the towns and guilds. Riga and Lübeck had guilds organized along similar lines. From 1542, the number of master goldsmiths allowed to practise in Riga was limited to twelve whereas the number in Reval was never fixed. The other Latvian towns that were allowed a limited number of masters were: Goldingen (Kuldīga), Libau (Liepāja), Mitau (Jelgava) and Bauske (Bauska). Upon payment of a set fee, *Mitmeisters* could acquire the right to use the hallmarks of the town, but their work would have been considered of a lower standard and they would have been more likely to concentrate on pro-

ducing jewellery rather than showpieces. To obtain guild status, not only did a craftsman have to be a citizen of the town with the requisite financial standing, he also had to prove his German or at least Swedish origins. As late as 1805 the master-title could be refused on the grounds of being married to a Latvian. Journeymen had to spend their *Wanderjahre* in Germany and when this restriction was lifted by the Russians in the nineteenth century it was replaced by a decree forcing journeymen to stay in Russia. By that time St Petersburg, the brilliant artistic centre of the Baltic, had enticed away the most talented goldsmiths and local creativity came to a virtual standstill.

Because of its position between the European superpowers, Latvia remained a battleground for 600 years. Looting was commonplace as was high taxation to finance the various wars. The splendour of some of the surviving pieces can only hint at the magnificence of objects which must have been consigned to the melt. Once produced in their thousands, the *Hansekanne* is a drinking vessel which was popular in North Germany and the Baltic countries. Now extremely rare, a few surviving examples

can be found in Germany, Riga, Reval, Stockholm, Leningrad and Great Britain. The tall, exquisitely ornamented, downward tapering body does not seem to relate to any previous drinking vessel. The Victoria and Albert Museum owns an example made by the Riga master Hans Rolowes (1580–1602) (Fig. 1), probably the elder. Unfortunately the thumb piece is now missing. A better example of a *Hansekanne* can be found in the British Museum. Slightly later in date, it is more richly embossed, chased and cast. The tendril-like spirals attached to the handle terminate in two small female forms. The medallion with the Riga arms set in its lid suggests that it may have belonged to the Riga City Treasury.

The city treasuries were an important source of patronage for goldsmiths as was the very rich *Schwarzhaupler* association. This was a group of rich unmarried merchants whose members would therefore not obtain master status of a guild. The last remnants of the medieval *Schwarzhaupler* house in Riga were pulled down in the '50s but some objects in the Riga History Museum give an indication of its prosperity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Two other *Hansekanne* in the exhibition were on loan from the Hermitage. The one by Christian Holst (Riga, 1612–?) is a superb example of the Baltic mannerist style. Standing nearly 43.2 cm high, the silver-gilt intricacy of the scroll and strapwork ornament combined with the four evangelists and female figures indicate that this was a ceremonial drinking vessel. The other example from the Hermitage is smaller, by an unknown master, and has a pierced lug thumbpiece, depicting hunting scenes on the middle band and winged putti underneath. Measuring pegs on the silver-gilt inside indicate that the *Hansekanne* was put to good use.

Peg tankards with their broad baroque shape where height almost equals width are also found in the north of England and Scotland. Eight pegs are evenly spaced inside for fair communal drinking. A painting showing a peg tankard in use can be seen in the Riga History Museum, and such drinking appears to have been connected with the payment of certain taxes, which having been settled was rewarded with a measured swig from the tankard. These tankards were often referred to as *Porterkanne* after the strong imported English beer.

Coin tankards are not particularly Baltic, but the example by Ewert Panck (Goldingen, 1686–1707), a perfectly balanced, weighty vessel, stood out in the exhibition as a good example of this style in which coins on a particular theme, such as Greek or Roman Emperors, were inset into the body and the lid. Parcel-gilding brought out the fine detail on these tankards, the basic shape remaining popular well into the eighteenth century. Coming from a well known family

of Swedish pastors. Ewert Panck also made a silver collection bag for the protestant St Katarina Church in Goldingen (Fig. 2). These collection-bags have only been recorded in the Baltic region and all of them date from the eighteenth century. They are cylindrical with a leather bag inside to hold the collection and on the body embossed scenes from the Old Testament, or in the case of a plainer body, the armorials of the donor can be depicted. The rounded base or the stick-holder sometimes has a little bell attached to it (hence the German *Klingelbeutel*) which served to wake up the parish for the duration of the collection. The silver bag was attached to a long wooden stick, which would be at least half the length of a church bench.

In 1634 goldsmiths became classified as 'free artists', which effectively meant that they could join the high ranking Riga guilds along with scientists, merchants and artists. The newly gained respectability of the goldsmiths coupled with an upward swing in the economy after the Thirty Years War saw an abundance of silver commissions. Fresh stylistic influences from Augsburg and Nuremberg were felt in the form of the *Willkomm*, indispensable for well-to-do families and guilds. The *Willkomm* is a standing cup with domed lid and foot, a symbolic figure on top of the lid and one holding the bulging and 'ensnared' cup. These figures, such as a Bacchus merrily riding a casket of wine, were provided by sculptors. A typically Baltic feature was to hang small engraved shields from loops on the cup. These commemorated special occasions and guests that had been toasted with the *willkomm*. The cups were part of the journeyman's master assessment and can therefore often rightfully be claimed as 'masterpieces'.

The French style which dominated the arts during the eighteenth century was slow to influence the Baltic countries. When, after 1760, the rococo movement seeps through, it is mainly via Sweden. The devastation caused by the Nordic War and the plague which followed in 1710 wiped out all but one master goldsmith in Riga and Revel. This disaster led to an influx of foreigners with quick career prospects and Swedish journeymen (despite the area becoming Russian) flooded in. Johann Abrahamson Lamoureux (Riga, 1719-49) from Stockholm, and, after his death his wife, Maria Dieckens, led a very productive workshop for nineteen years until their son Johann Friedrich Lamoureux (1768-80) took over. Twenty-three items by the elder Lamoureux are known, a large amount by Baltic standards. His style is High Baroque, and among the items on show were a large pair of candlesticks, a *Willkomm* from the Rope-Maker Society and a crucifix for the Administrative Court of Appeal. His son's work demonstrates the restrained Swedish



3 Coin tankard by Johann Friedrich Möller (Active 1720-d. 1767), 1689-91. Height 23.2 cm, weight 2.1 kg. Seventeen coins of emperors and kings on the body, medallion on the lid with a portrait of Johann Friedrich I, Duke of Saxony. Riga Museum. Private collection

rococo style illustrated in the exhibition by a shallow casket for sweets, a tea-pot and parcel-gilt beakers with armorials and inset coins. Among the Swedish immigrants two other goldsmiths were Lars Johann Silfwerstedt (Riga, 1748-72) and Ignatius Wilhelm Herring (Goldingen, 1746-84); their work is well represented in museums in Stockholm and Lund (Kulturen), which has a large collection of Baltic silver.

Johann Christoph Borrowsky (Riga, 1771-90) is the last of the great masters active in Latvia. Born in Danzig, his style is positively catholic, leaning towards the *rocaille*. One of his most outstanding pieces in the Germanische Nationale, Nuremberg, is a tureen with tray and soup ladle (Fig. 4). A sugar-caster with intricate rose blossoms in the exhibition demonstrates the subtlety of his craft. Church silver was also well represented in the exhibition, as churches were exempt from paying taxes. As machine

manufacture took over from craftsmanship during the nineteenth century, the originality and standard of work dropped considerably. An upsurge in the economy after independence was declared in 1918 was brutally halted by World War II. The Soviet occupation which followed smothered artistic freedom and the supply of materials, and led to the total eclipse of Baltic silver.

The exhibition 'Silver in Kunstgewerbe Lettlands' was held in the Palace of Rundale in Courland from October to December 1990. It is scheduled to travel to Sweden and Finland in September 1991 where it is hoped a catalogue will be printed.

<sup>1</sup> There is a very limited amount of material in print on Baltic Silver and most of it is written in German or Swedish. Dr Annelore Leistikow is at the moment working on a book on Baltic silver, which will be published in 1992. Two articles of her have been of great help: 'Baltische Gold- und Silberschmiedekunst', *Katalog für Ausstellung*, Darmstadt, 1988; 'Gebet, so wird euch Gegeben', *Kunst und Antiquitäten*, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Further useful articles and books are: Mai Raad, 'Baltisk Silversmide, från medeltid till 1900-tal', exhibition catalogue *Baltiskt silver i sjuend ågö-Kulturen*, Lund 1986; R. W. Lightbown, *Catalogue of Scandinavian and Baltic Silver*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1975; while the classic book on the subject is still Th. Buchholz *Goldschmiedarbeiten in Livland, Estland und Kurland*, Lübeck, 1892. For Baltic marks see W. Neumann, *Verzeichnis baltischer Goldschmiede, ihrer Markzeichen und Werke*, Riga, 1905.