

Timothy Schroder / Dora Thornton: *A Royal Renaissance Treasure and its Afterlives: The Royal Clock Salt* (= Research Publication, 227), London: The British Museum Press 2021, ISBN 978-0-8615-9227-2, GBP 40,00.

Book review by Cristiano Zanetti¹

This enjoyable book, with its rich iconographic apparatus, presents to the general public a most curious object that embodies, all at the same time, the shapes and functions of a timepiece, a reliquary, a jewel and a table salt. In the editors' own words, this precious object "*Made in Paris around 1530 by [...] Pierre Mangot (c. 1485-after 1551) [...] is somewhere between a jewel, the latest fashion accessory and a table ornament*" (p. 1). The object is composed of gilded silver, rock crystal, gems, cameos and gears. This complex composite device was part of King Henry VIII of England's 3000-strong collection of objects made of precious materials and is now one of the most valuable objects in the collections of the Goldsmiths' Company in London.

Recently, from 2018 to 2020, the Goldsmiths' Company loaned the Clock Salt to the British Museum, where a team of experts was able to study its materiality, original meaning, and changes over time. The book collects the proceedings of a conference organized on this object, which was held in November 2018 in Goldsmiths' Hall, London. The volume is divided into 8 chapters, each written by a different author, plus an introduction and a conclusion written by the four hands of Timothy Schroder and Dora Thornton, the two editors of the volume. Timothy Schroder is also the author of the first chapter exploring the context of the diplomatic gifts, standardized as silver or gold plate objects for ambassadors, between the courts of Francis I of France and Henry VIII of England, not without interesting and sometimes amusing insights. One important feature of this kind of gift was that they were easy to cash in. Among the 18,000 items held in the English Royal collection at the death of Henry VIII (1547), 3,000 objects were of plate, and only four have been identified with certainty: a cup, a bowl, a vase, and the Royal Clock Salt. However, how the Clock Salt entered the English royal collections remains a mystery. Schroder reminds us nevertheless that this typology of objects was quite popular at the time, and we find 12 clock salts among the 200 timepieces which appear in the abovementioned 1547 inventory. In this regard, it is surprising that throughout the book there is no mention of two articles by Víctor Pérez Álvarez that appeared recently in two issues of *Antiquarian Horology* (2013 and 2015) where similar objects, from the Renaissance Spanish-Burgundian royal treasury, offer an interesting parallel for this Frankenstein-like object. An editing problem occurred in this first chapter, where some of the references in the footnotes are only mentioned by the shortened bibliographical and archival references without a list of abbreviations to interpret them. However, once notified Sarah Faulks, the Senior Editorial Manager at the British Museum, immediately corrected this in the free online digital version of the book:

<https://britishmuseum.iro.bl.uk/concern/books/6089308e-cb51-4969-a555-044bcf181d8d>

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Chapter 2 brings us to France (and to Vienna, where the objects discussed in the chapter are now held in the Kunsthistorisches Museum). The author, Paulus Rainer, explores the functions of “objects d’art” at the court of Francis I, exploiting the tasty insight provided by Benvenuto Cellini’s page-turner autobiography. Cellini was the author of the most famous Renaissance salt cellar: the *Saliera* made for King Francis I. Other precious objects, all recalling parts of the Royal Clock Salt, are discussed here to better understand the context for the creation of such an object.

In Chapter 3, Michèle Bimbenet-Privat takes the reader to Mantua, Tours, Blois, and Paris following the biography, production, workshop and style, collaborations and influences of the goldsmith Pierre Mangot, author of the Royal Clock Salt. Mangot, without being resident at court, provided, through his workshop, many works for the French Crown. The importance of this chapter is of course paramount for us to materially contextualize the object at the center of this book. The chapter ends with a chronology of Mangot’s life and documented works and a glossary.

In Chapter 4, we follow Dora Thornton to the other side of the Channel, to the British Museum in London, where she examines the enameled Syblis Casket, also attributed to Pierre Mangot, and other similar works.

In chapter 5, Olenka Horbatsch deals with a less known role played in Tudor England by the great painter Hans Holbein the Younger as a designer for goldsmiths. Among his 200 drawings for ornamental objects, there is one for another impressive clock salt executed for Sir Anthony Denny in 1543. Sir Anthony was the Keeper of Whitehall Palace and presented King Henry VIII with this clock salt on New Year's Day 1544, shortly after Holbein’s death. This clock salt, compared with that of the protagonist of the book, testifies to the dramatic stylistic shift in ornamental objects taking place in London by around 1540.

In chapter 6, Rosemary Ransome Wallis follows the life of the Royal Clock Salt after the reign of Charles I, the king executed in 1649. She underlines a very important point for attempting to reconstruct the changes that the Clock Salt underwent over the next centuries: the device was remodeled several times between the 17th and 19th centuries, and then faithfully restored, although only partially, in the 20th century.

Chapter 7, by Julia Siemon, addresses the topic of collecting continental Renaissance silver in the 19th century, and the role played by the Rothschild family in the creation of a taste for such objects. Thanks to this revival of Renaissance French and German plate and clockworks in that period, the Royal Clock Salt was on loan to important exhibitions on a couple of occasions, becoming visible to the public.

Chapter 8 is a collective work by the technical staff of the British Museum (Andrew Meek, Oliver Cooke, Fleur Shearman, Denise Ling, Caroline Cartwright, Daniel O'Flynn and Joanne Dye), and it provides a companion to chapter 6. Despite the short time at their disposal and the limited analytical technologies, the team was able to perform X-radiography, X-ray fluorescence, multispectral imaging, digital microscopy, and a mechanical analysis of the train. The analyses confirm the great alterations that occurred to the Royal Clock Salt. The authors also provide interesting parallels with sixteenth-century clock salts, table clocks, and rock crystal clock cases.

One of the most astonishing features of the object is the cylindrical rock-crystal case. The book does not explore this element in detail. However, the volume provides an excellent case study in the material history of clockworks: I think that one of the most important achievements of this work is to demonstrate the complexity of the reading of ancient mechanical instruments. While the diverse composition of a courtly object such as the Clock Salt provides different elements for comparison, and therefore for dating, the mutability over time of this work was so great that none of the hypothetical reconstructions provided by the scholars can be accepted as definitive. The problem is that mechanical objects, and jewelry, are subject to dramatic changes in taste. Jewelry can be deconstructed as its malleable precious metal and gems and reassembled according to the new fashion without losing its intrinsic value. Gears are subject to great mechanical stress and wear, requiring continuous refashioning, also according to constant technological innovation. Moreover, because of economic reasons, sometimes they can be subject to forgery in an attempt to imitate an old-fashioned mechanism. This book also shows that the descriptions of complex objects in inventories are sometimes not enough to enable us to recognize them: the Royal Clock Salt, for instance, can be identified by two different entries in the 1547 English royal inventory (p. 6). This kind of source needs to be integrated with the iconographic documents, which rarely exist. However, a thorough investigation of the historical context and of the materiality of the object, when still extant, can offer important insights, as this book convincingly demonstrates.