
Research Forum Visiting Curator, December 2011 -January 2012: Report

Report on the Gambier Parry metalwork in The Courtauld Gallery

The Collection

The Gambier Parry metalwork consists of 22 brass vessels and objects. Seventeen are from Turkey, Syria, Egypt and Iraq and are datable between about 1300 and 1600, all of them finely engraved and inlaid with silver and gold. Three more objects can be attributed to sixteenth-century Venice. Two candlesticks are nineteenth-century Italian work (these do not appear in the Highnam inventory and may have been bought as modern imitations by Gambier Parry). It is a small group but the objects are of high quality and some of them are of exceptional interest, notably the Wallet, the bowl signed by Mahmud al-Kurdi and the spherical incense burner.

The metalwork is part of the collection of paintings and works of art acquired by Thomas Gambier Parry (1816-88) which was bequeathed to The Courtauld Gallery by his grandson, Mark Gambier Parry in 1966. The Middle Eastern metalwork appears to be an anomaly within a collection of Gothic and Renaissance European art, but at the time of their acquisition, most of it was thought to have been made in fifteenth-century Venice. Nineteenth-century collectors in Italy, especially in Venice, discovered large numbers of brass vessels, some of them with European forms and many with European shields, but inlaid with gold and silver, a Middle Eastern technique, with arabesques and other motifs in Arab style. In an attempt to explain this so-called 'Veneto- Saracenic' metalwork, it was suggested that a colony of immigrant Arab craftsmen resident in Venice were responsible for inlaying metal vessels for local patrons. This theory endured into the 1980s but it is now generally accepted that 'Veneto-Saracenic' objects were actually commissioned by Italian merchants based in the Middle East for export to Europe. At least seven objects in the collection would have been recognized as Middle Eastern work by Gambier Parry. He may have acquired these with the intention of illustrating the links between Arab, 'Veneto-Saracenic' and Italian metalwork like his contemporaries, Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks at the British Museum and Sir John Charles Robinson at the Victoria and Albert Museum, who were both creating displays of metalwork (and other media) to demonstrate the influence of Middle Eastern inlaid metalwork on Italian Renaissance craftsmen.

Conservation

Inlaid metalwork relies on the contrasting tone and colour of the gold, silver and black inlays and the yellow brass body to achieve its effect. The brass of most of the metalwork has darkened and any remaining silver has tarnished. Modern taste demands some evidence of age in medieval objects and so the brass bodies of Islamic metalwork are normally left dark – but the silver should be cleaned. Some of the objects have been scrubbed clean of their inlays (a common error as the inlaid black ground and blackened silver can easily be mistaken for dirt) and the engraved designs are now almost invisible as they merge with the brass ground. The upper surface of these should be cleaned but the background should be left as dark (even dirty) as possible to try and restore a little contrast.

Display

Most of the collection is on display in one wall case in the corner of the Gothic and early Renaissance gallery on the ground floor. It could be shown to better advantage. At the moment the metalwork is displayed against a dark textile but a pale coloured surround would emphasise the shapes of the vessels and enhance their inlays (pale colours reflect in the silver inlays). Specialist lighting, if that is possible, would also make a huge difference. Alternatively, it might be worth moving the display to a gallery where it can receive more space and light. The wallet really needs and deserves a case to itself. Perhaps the designer of the Wallet exhibition planned for 2014 could ensure that the case used in the exhibition is also suitable for permanent display in the gallery.

Publication

The collection is little published. Basil Robinson did a brief survey of the collection in 1967 ('Oriental Metalwork in the Gambier-Parry Collection', *Burlington Magazine* vol 109, pp. 169-171, 173) but a full catalogue of the Gambier Parry metalwork is desirable. It would give the objects a historical context which is not possible in the Gallery and would help to make them better known amongst scholars and the interested public.

Extending the Collection

I was asked whether I would recommend extending the metalwork collection. I would not. London already has two world class collections of Islamic art, including excellent metalwork, in the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Both of these collections have material which can be made available to students for handling. But it may be worth considering the purchase of objects in different media which also illustrate trading links and cultural and technological exchange between the Middle East and Europe: for example, Mamluk or Ottoman pottery with European shields, made for export to Europe like so much of the Gambier Parry metalwork, or Mamluk enamelled glass to display alongside the Venetian enamelled glass (which it inspired) in the collection.

Visitors

Several colleagues visited The Courtauld to view the collection while I was there. A fruitful day was spent examining the objects under the microscope with Susan La Niece, Research Scientist at the British Museum and Aviva Burnstock, Head of Conservation and Technology at The Courtauld. Examination of one object has revealed an unusual inlay material and coincidentally Alexandra Gerstein discovered that the Victoria and Albert Museum is already investigating similar inlays on their Islamic metalwork, so Lucia Borgio, the conservator leading that research at the V&A has analysed the inlay on the Courtauld bowl. In addition, the workshop on the wallet (see below) brought many international scholars to The Courtauld, many of them for the first time.

Seminars

I gave two seminars on Islamic metalwork with students from the Byzantine and Renaissance modules at The Courtauld Institute of Art; both included a handling session which was appreciated by the students. I also gave a lunch presentation on

the collection to staff at the Gallery and Institute which generated an interesting discussion.

Courtauld Wallet workshop and exhibition

In addition to my role as Visiting Curator, I have been working on an exhibition focused on the Gambier Parry wallet, scheduled for Spring 2014. On January 27 2012 I held a workshop on the Wallet in the Research Forum. Twenty eight academics working on the history, art history and epigraphy of the Mongol period came from around the world. For future reference, twenty-eight is the absolute maximum number that can be squeezed into the Research Forum seminar room. The workshop was useful preparation for the exhibition – the date, provenance and function of the wallet was discussed, possible exhibits were suggested and several of the participants will contribute an essay to the exhibition catalogue. At the end of the day, all of the Islamic material (other metalwork, Iznik pottery, etc.) was brought from the reserve collection to the gallery, to show the visiting academics the full extent of the collection and to enable them to examine some of the objects.

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