

Breakout Session Record

Amanuensis/Student name: Anke Timmermann

Date: 14 July 2005

Institution: Victoria and Albert Museum

Title of Breakout session: Metalworking and meaning

Names of Breakout session leaders: Paul Clark, Natural History Museum,
London
Peta Motture, V&A
David Reed, NHML
Pamela Smith, Columbia University

General themes discussed at the Breakout session:

1. the material bronze

Renaissance terminology and overlap with 'brass'; composition of bronze; different alloys and possibility of regional preferences for them; Renaissance connotations of bronze with antiquity, and corresponding popularity of the material; perception of bronze as a 'speaking' metal → these associations are important to the context of casting from life: it was perceived to be a particularly appropriate material

2. casting techniques

solid vs. hollow casting ('slush modelling'); direct casting from one specimen which is destroyed in the process vs. production of a mould for current reuse; wax models; bell as an example for sand casting, explanation of surface structure; techniques of removing objects from molds and finishing surface for different methods of casting; s. xvi treatises and their discussion of the 'perfect sand'

3. objects (see object information sheets)

discussion with experts from the V&A, NHM and BM; foci on establishing origin of crabs and molluscs (i.e. the animals, before casting); dating of the

bronze objects; identification of casting techniques; comparison of objects from different collections to find out about context of objects

Any other information about the session:

crabs preserved in alcohol were brought in to compare cast and natural body in their characteristics; this was supplemented by schematic anatomical pictures of crabs, statistics on the measurements of different kinds of *Carinus* (crab) (both in powerpoint presentation); other visual material included photographs of metal objects decorated with cast insects, and schematic depictions of casting processes

several questions were posed about the technicalities of casting (e.g. popularity of sand casting, applications and contexts of different methods)

Object information

Object title: Mortar

Object Date: 1525-50

Museum accession number of object: M.16-1939

Description of object: bronze mortar decorated with animal and plant motives

Function of object? mortar

Where was the object used/viewed/consumed? the production is the most interesting aspect in the current context: the decoration is based on designs of plaquettes by the German sculptor and medallist Peter Flötner (c. 1485-1546)

Who used it? N/A

Original context of the object? southern German provenance

The significance of the object? decoration resembles that on objects in precious metals by goldsmiths such as Wenzel Jamnitzer and on ceramics by Bernard Palissy

What questions did the audience ask on this object?

Q relating to Pamela Smith's talk and the mortar: significance of butter and herbs

A: butter supposed to give live objects more substance, better for use in casting (but modern reproduction of experiment not successful)

Q: is the time of year crucial to the success/relevant to the result of casting?

A: early modern treatises claim that it is important; however, possibly a myth.

Environmental conditions, notably temperature, does make a difference particularly in relation to waxes used in casting.

[comment by participant: lead was used to thicken herbs and ferns before making copper plate, so they would have a more prominent surface structure, and the impression would be better than when produced from the otherwise quite flat plants]

[discussion of use and purpose of different metals, e.g. lead vs. bronze; qualities with regard to the preservation of details of the cast objects, surface, etc.]

Object information

Object title: Crab with shells

Object Date: Probably s.xviii (dating problematic, see below)

Museum accession number of object: A.2-1935

Description of object: bronze cast of a crab, surrounded by shells
(direct cast from a real crab)

Function of object? collectors' piece/inkstand

Where was the object used/viewed/consumed? presumably part of collection; used
as an inkstand

Who used it? collectors with an interest in natural history

Original context of the object? Formerly described as Italian (Padua); crab and
shells identified as European. Now thought probably to be produced in England

The significance of the object? exact replica of crab; in the current context: model
for casting technique

What questions did the audience ask on this object?

questions applied to all three crabs, hence summarised below

Object information

Object title: Crab with shells

Object Date: prob. s. xviii (dating problematic, see below)

Museum accession number of object: [loan from British Museum for session]

Description of object: bronze cast of a crab, surrounded by shells

Function of object? [cp. V&A crab above]

Where was the object used/viewed/consumed? in Sir Hans Sloane's collection

Who used it? N/A

Original context of the object? Previously identified as possibly Paduan, s.xvi;
now thought probably to be probably English s.xviii

The significance of the object? in the present context: variant of the V&A crab,
may be instrumental in establishing datings of either object; *note that there are two
additional variants in silver gilt in the Royal Collection (made by Nicholas Sprimont around
1742-3), pictures of which are in the accompanying material*

What questions did the audience ask on this object?

questions apply to all the V&A, BM and Royal Collection crabs

With regards to the crab with shells, David Reed emphasised that the casts of some of the molluscs were identical in the V&A and BM pieces examined.

Discussion of how and whether it is possible to identify casting technique used in production of a particular object

Q: issue of forgeries: what is the point of forgeries if the original object does not have an intrinsic value?

A: copies not necessarily made to deceive, but in order to make it possible for everyone to own a personal copy of, say, a sixteenth-century Paduan bronze (i.e. the notion of a 'forgery' is anachronistic in this context). Fakes were produced in the nineteenth century for profit and to feed the market.

Q: are we discrediting the skill and expertise of craftsmen when we think we can determine whether an object was cast from life from examining the cast object in comparison to the original object?

A: [left open in discussion]

Q: [terminology] what is an aftercast?

A: it is a cast made from an existing bronze; it is usually possible to tell an aftercast; it is usually said that it is up to 10% smaller in scale, though this is debatable, and it may contain imperfections from the original bronze.

Q: why are there holes in the base of the bronze? (see photo in accompanying material)

A: they result from the behaviour of metal when it cools down

Q: are there other crabs of this kind in international museum collections?

A: these (V&A, BM and Royal Collections) are the only variants of this particular model known to the session leaders

Q: does the size of an object not give us any indication on whether it was cast from a specimen itself or a mould?

A: it is true that aftercasts (i.e. casts from existing bronzes) are usually said to be smaller; on the other hand, crabs used in life-casting, for example, were almost certainly only used once, while other animals, such as lizards, are sometimes made from moulds taken from the dead animal which could be reused. Taking reusable piece moulds from a complex animal like a crab would be difficult.

- discussion on how you can determine the geographical origin of a specific crab

Q: how do metalworkers acquire crabs?

A: crabs would not have been transported very far (practical reasons), but moulds could be lent to other people; and the shells themselves were transported as specimens for collections. Nevertheless it is most likely that crabs cast in England are of English origin. Preservation of natural history specimens at the time of the bronzes was by drying; wet preservation, using liquids such as alcohol, in glass containers was not commonplace.

- explanations of growing patterns in crabs (steps rather than regular curve, due to progression from soft to hard shell and replacement of latter as soon as crab outgrows it)

Q: can casts be made from soft shells?

A: no, the material would be too soft to leave a distinctive impression for mould.

Dating of crabs

Much of the discussion concerned the dating of the bronze crabs. The comparison of the variants in the V&A, British Museum and Royal Collection has highlighted how difficult it can be even to assign the century of production. The close relationship of the form, together with the *Buccinum* [?] shell, which appears to have been cast from moulds taken from the same specimen on the V&A and BM objects suggests that they are

contemporary, though their exact form is different. The session leaders discussed ways of finding out about provenance and dating of the objects, and different methods that could be applied for answering that question. The dating of bronzes is problematic, and the evidence for dating inconclusive. However, following comparison of the objects, coupled with available documentary evidence, the initial consensus of opinion is that all the related crab and frog groups are more likely to be eighteenth century following the Sprimont design, and therefore made in England, rather than Paduan sixteenth-century. Further investigation will follow in the Autumn, with the intention of publishing the results in the future. It is hoped that a preliminary (and perhaps informal) inventory of life casts of frogs and crabs in European museums can be undertaken to assist in clarifying the date of these objects.

Object information

Object title: Pounce-box in the form of a frog and shell

Object Date: previously thought to be ca. 1525-75; now considered s.xviii

Museum accession number of object: M.103-1953

Description of object: bronze pounce box, probably cast directly from life or moulds

Function of object? used to sprinkle sand or powder onto ink to help it dry (used with adjacent crab inkstand)

Where was the object used/viewed/consumed? study

Who used it? N/A

Original context of the object? Origin previously thought to be north Italian (Padua?), cp. description on accompanying sheet; now thought to relate to Sloane version, probably s.xviii

The significance of the object? here used to place crabs into context and to compare to Sloane version lent by BM for the session.

What questions did the audience ask on this object?

[none asked specifically about this object, but discussion of shells on all objects was illustrated with it]

NB: A similar bronze was brought from the British Museum. It had formerly formed part of the set with the Crab with Shells inkstand.

Object information

Object title: crab (*Eriochier* 'Chinese mitten crab')

Object Date: formerly thought to be s.xvi, probably s.xix

Museum accession number of object: A.98-1919

Description of object: bronze cast of so-called 'Chinese mitten crab'

Function of object? ornamental; natural historical collection purposes

Where was the object used/viewed/consumed? Unknown

Who used it? presumably collectors of specimens and objects

Original context of the object? (see description on accompanying sheet): formerly described as Italian (Padua), now thought to be possibly Japanese

The significance of the object? represents cast of kind of crab not necessarily native to the country it was cast in and highlights how identification of the species assisted in determining probable origin.

What questions did the audience ask on this object?

- presentation of facts on this particular kind of crab, its natural habitat, behaviour; attempts to introduce it to London environment; apparently sold as a delicacy in Asia; pictures (beautiful watercolours from an Asian booklet) shown

Q: was there a particular popularity of marine casts in coastal areas or midlands?

A: no

Q: did single workshops specialise in certain motives?

A: not that we can tell

Q: purpose of collecting bronzes like this?

A: natural historical interests and, as mentioned above, possibility of owning an object for those who cannot own the original; exoticism not necessarily important (depending on period in which it was made/collected), but aesthetics – hence composition is a bit odd: some of the objects represented in a bronze would be familiar to any fisherman, but

the shells grouped with them are from a completely different context, so the composition is not a completely naturalistic one.

Q & A: practicalities and early modern techniques of catching crayfish.

Current label:

MORTAR, Bronze

South German; about 1525-50

M.16-1939

The naturalistic animal decoration resembles that on the objects in precious metals by goldsmiths such as Wenzel Jamnitzer (1508-1585) and on ceramics made by Bernard Palissy. Casts were sometimes made directly from insects or plants and, according to Johann Neudörfer, the skill of Jamnitzer and his brother 'in making castings of little animals, worms, grasses and snails in silver and decorating silver vessels therewith has never been heard of before'. The figures are based on designs by the German sculptor and medallist Peter Flötner (c.1485-1546).

Previous label:

CRAB WITH SHELLS, Bronze

EUROPEAN (probably North Italy); 16th century

A.2-1935

This bronze, which would have been used as an inkstand, was cast directly from a real crab. The body was covered in clay and fired in a kiln. It was completely burnt in the process, leaving space in the clay mould for liquid bronze to be poured in and allowed to cool, providing an exact replica of the crab.

Current label:

POUNCE-BOX IN THE FORM OF A FROG AND SHELL, Bronze

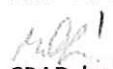
NORTH ITALIAN (Padua?); about 1525-1575

M.103-1953

Pounce-boxes or sanders were used to sprinkle sand or powder onto ink to help it to dry. This box, and the adjacent inkstand in the form of a crab, would have been used in a study. The frog and shell were probably cast directly from life, or from moulds similar to those used by Palissy.

- The relationship between these bronzes and those at the British Museum (formerly owned by Sir Hans Sloane) and the Royal Collections (made by Nicholas Sprimont around 1742-3 is currently being investigated. Are the bronzes 16th or 18th century?

The British Museum have kindly brought Sir Hans Sloane's set for comparison.


CRAB, bronze

Formerly described as ITALIAN (Padua); 16th century

Origin of cast unknown: possibly 19th century; crab identified as Asian

A.98-1919



V&A Mortar
M.16-1939



A.2-
1935

b/r
(1 piece)



A.2-1935



A.2-1935



British Museum
conspat (?)



Bath Museum
counterpart (?)

to receive Centre Marine Ornament with festoons of shells, Sea Horses &c' for George IV. The marine decoration and forms of the service inspired many of the pieces of plate supplied for George IV by Rundells in the 1810s and 20s (for instance, nos 184, 185).

Silver-gilt. 68 × 66 × 47 cm

London hallmarks for 1741-2 and maker's mark of Paul Crespin; the shell mount below the tureen with Turin townmark and maker's mark of Andrea Boucheron; the later hippocamp (seahorse) base with hallmarks for London, 1826-7 and maker's mark of John Bridge

RCIN 50282

PROVENANCE Almost certainly made for Frederick, Prince of Wales, 1741-2; hippocamp base added by Rundell, Bridge & Rundell for George IV, 1827 (£484 1s. 7d.; RA GEO/26324; PRO LC9/351, f. 41)

LITERATURE Jones (E.A.) 1911, pp. 72 and 98; Garrard 1914, nos 163, 207, 210; Grimwade 1969; Grimwade 1974, pp. 30-4, 47-8; Barr 1980, pp. 170-2

EXHIBITIONS London 1954c, nos 39, 43, 44; Paris 1959, no. 170; Johannesburg 1960, no. 16; London 1965; London 1984, no. G17; QG 1988-9, nos 114 and 118-19; London 1992a; Cardiff 1998, no. 45

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NICHOLAS SPRIMONT (1716-1771)

Two pairs of salts, 1742-3

The salts are struck with the maker's mark of Nicholas Sprimont, a Liègeois Huguenot who appears to have moved to London early in 1742, where he became a leading practitioner of the rococo style. Sprimont's silver is exceptionally rare and no. 179 are among the best-known examples of his work. It has been suggested that the striking naturalism of these two pairs of salts was achieved by casting actual seashells, crabs and crayfish from life. They were almost certainly supplied for the Marine Service of Frederick, Prince of Wales, in the early 1740s (see no. 178). Sprimont appears to have worked only with silver for six or seven years. From c.1745 he was involved with the establishment of the Chelsea porcelain factory (see no. 108). The crayfish salt served as a model for porcelain versions subsequently reproduced by the factory.

The accompanying spoons are modelled as branches of coral with cockleshell bowls; they are illustrated here resting inside the bowls of the salts. The spoons, which are unmarked, appear on an undated sheet of designs attributed to Sprimont for a salt cellar with alternate spoons discovered in a collection of seventy-eight sheets of drawings in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Silver-gilt. Crab salts 8.9 × 17.8 × 11.7 cm; crayfish salts 8.7 × 14 × 14.1; spoons 11 cm long

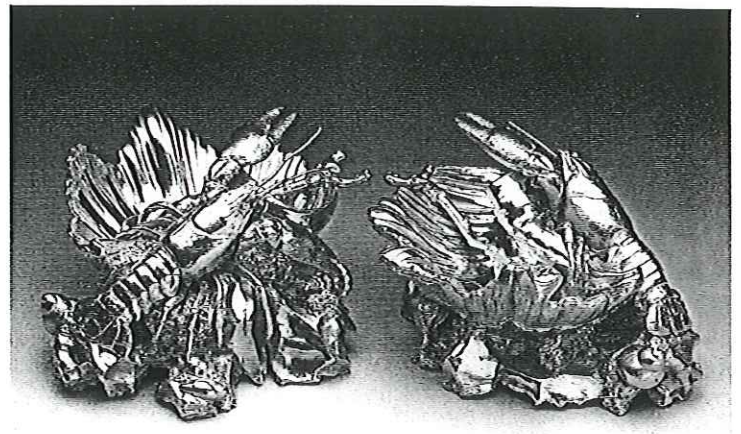
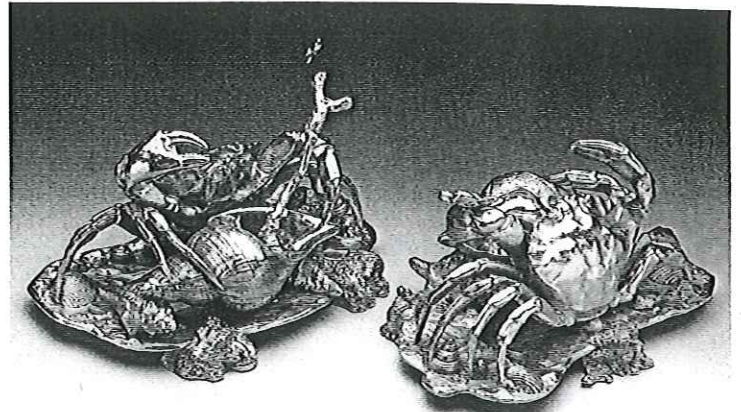
London hallmarks for 1742-3 and maker's mark of Nicholas Sprimont; spoons unmarked

RCIN 51368.1-4 (spoons), 51392.1-2 (crab salts), 51393.1-2 (crayfish salts)

PROVENANCE Almost certainly made for Frederick, Prince of Wales, 1742-3

LITERATURE Jones (E.A.) 1911, p. 98; Garrard 1914, nos 208, 209; Grimwade 1974, pp. 4, 16, 31, 45, pl. 37B

EXHIBITIONS London 1954c, nos 40, 41; Amsterdam/Rome/Geneva 1957-8, no. 62 (crab salt and spoon); Stockholm 1958, no. 66 (crab salt and spoon); Copenhagen 1958, no. 64 (crab salt and spoon); Johannesburg 1960, no. 7 (crab salt); Birmingham 1963 (crayfish salt); London 1984, no. G17; QG 1988-9, nos 116, 117; London 1992a; Cardiff 1998, no. 47



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NICHOLAS SPRIMONT (1716-1771)

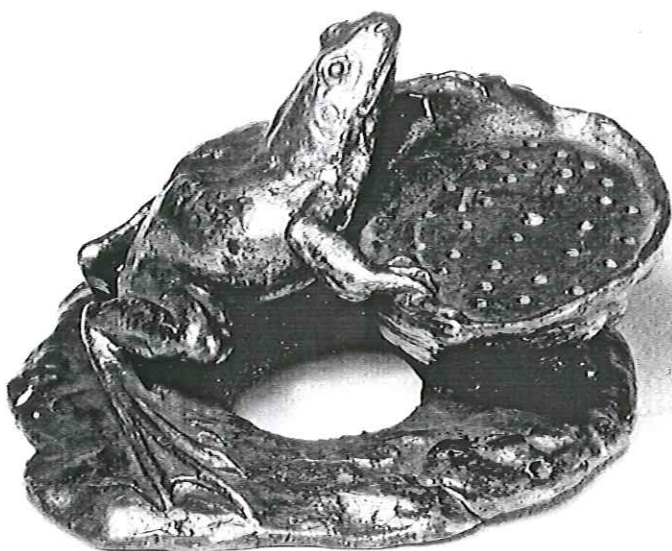
Two sauceboats, ladles and stands, 1743-4 and 1744-5

These exuberantly modelled sauceboats and stands by the leading rococo goldsmith Nicholas Sprimont are two from a set of four. Like no. 179 they were almost certainly supplied for the Marine Service of Frederick, Prince of Wales, between 1743 and 1745 (see no. 178). The modelling and chasing are of exceptional quality and these pieces rank among the finest of Sprimont's creations. The handles are ingeniously formed as seated figures – a water nymph and her companion – which recall Baroque fountain sculpture. The figures sit at the 'stern' of the raised boat-shaped bowl which is supported by cast dolphins. These dolphins closely resemble those on the Neptune centrepiece (no. 178), which, although struck with the mark of Paul Crespin, has also been attributed to Sprimont. For many years the stands were thought to be separate dessert dishes and they have only recently been reunited with the sauceboats.

During the nineteenth century Garrards made a number of copies of the sauceboats, including versions with different figures.

Silver-gilt. Sauceboats 22.7 × 23.2 × 13 cm; stands 28 × 22.4 × 3 cm; ladles 19.9 × 5.9 cm

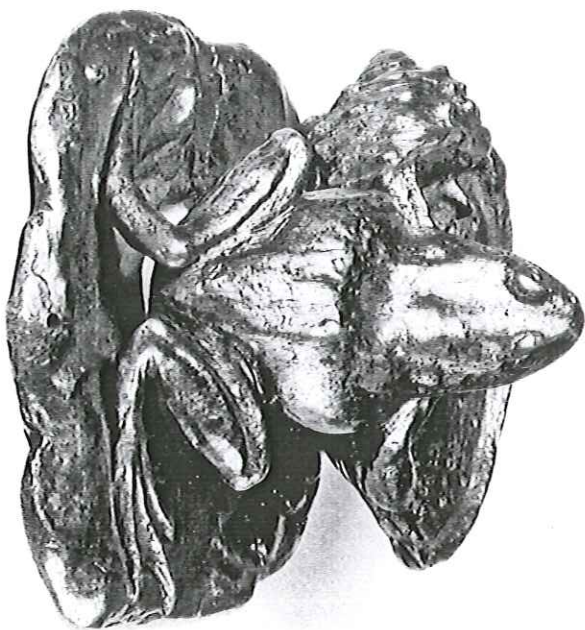
Both stands and one sauceboat hallmarked for London 1743-4, the other sauceboat hallmarked for 1744-5, all with maker's mark of Nicholas Sprimont; ladles unmarked



50476.

Ward.

~~Herpetological~~ M. 103-1953



50477.

neg. JD2347

A. 98-1919

