Between Art and Asset

Silver Vessels from Antiquity to Today

Saturday, November 3, 2018
Silver vessels have been prized possessions in many cultures, both ancient and modern. Some of the most elaborate vessels in the Animal-Shaped Vessels from the Ancient World: Feasting with Gods, Heroes, and Kings exhibition are fashioned from silver. What makes this material attractive for artists, and what makes drinking from silver vessels pleasant to the palate? Which intangible qualities have promoted the material’s use? How has appreciation of the vessels been influenced by the fact that silver often served as bullion and coins—and hence could be “cashed in”? Today’s program brings together art historians, a conservator, a numismatist, and a silversmith to explore these and related questions, including the function and uses of precious metal vessels, the role of craftsmanship, the symbolic qualities of silver, and silver’s relationship to other luxury materials.
Achaemenid Persian Silver: Notes on the Fungibility of Meaning

It is relatively easy to discern the functions of ancient silver, thanks to the objects that survive. The meaning of silver, on the other hand, is less straightforward. In antiquity, as today, silver had multiple meanings: it could be a status symbol, indicate royal favor, or be used as currency. This talk will examine the evidence for the various meanings of silver in the Achaemenid Empire and will consider how these meanings—like the metal itself—could be readily transformed.

Vessels, Bullion, and Banking: Silversmithing in Medieval China
François Louis, Associate Professor and Director of Doctoral Studies, Bard Graduate Center, New York

In China, a fully-fledged silversmithing tradition came about relatively late, around 700 CE. It was preceded by nearly a millennium of modest silver use, when elaborate silver vessels were known only as exotic imports from the West. This talk will characterize the production of medieval silver vessels in light of economic and geopolitical considerations, taking a particularly close look at the significance of bullion.

Reconstructing an Ancient Artifact: A Silversmith and a Conservator in Conversation
Adam Whitney, silversmith
Angela Chang, Conservator of Objects and Sculpture, Head of the Objects Lab, and Assistant Director of the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, Harvard Art Museums

A silver fragment of a deer, perhaps once attached to a rhyton from Persia’s Achaemenid Empire (c. 550–330 BCE) and now in the collection of the Harvard Art Museums, will be used as a case study to explore ancient silverworking from two angles: silversmith Adam Whitney will discuss re-creating the ancient object, and conservator Angela Chang will present the results of recent technical analysis of the original. This conversation seeks to deepen the understanding and appreciation of silver as a material and the craftsmanship of ancient silversmiths.
forms, and functions—signified the empire’s political, economic, and symbolic power. This talk will consider evidence from written sources, archaeological finds, museum collections, and metallurgical analyses to examine the many facets of Byzantine silver, including issues of identity and meaning for its intended audiences across the empire and beyond its borders.

Reign of the Moon: Silver Drinking Vessels and Elite Power in the Ancient Andes

In the ancient Andes, drinking vessels were markers of social distinction, but they also provided the means to commune with divine forces. Used in ritual before ultimately being placed in burials, these objects allowed both the living and the dead to connect with the gods. This talk will explore notions of terrestrial and divine power, gender, and artistic innovation through the study of a remarkable set of silver vessels made on Peru’s North Coast around the time of the rise of the Incas.

Silver, Gold, Ivory, and Gemstones: Material and Symbolic Values of Precious Materials in Classical Antiquity
Kenneth Lapatin, Curator of Antiquities, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Beginning with ancient Greek and Roman attitudes toward silver as reflected in myth, history, religion, artistic representations, and surviving artifacts, this presentation will explore some of the metal’s commonalities with and differences from other precious substances highly valued by inhabitants of the Classical world.

Roundtable
Chair: Susanne Ebbinghaus, George M.A. Hanfmann Curator of Ancient Art and Head of the Division of Asian and Mediterranean Art, Harvard Art Museums

3:30–4pm

Support for the symposium is provided by the M. Victor Leventritt Fund, which was established through the generosity of the wife, children, and friends of the late M. Victor Leventritt, Harvard Class of 1935. The purpose of the fund is to present outstanding scholars of the history and theory of art to the Harvard and Greater Boston communities.

Crucial support for the Animal-Shaped Vessels exhibition came in the form of a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Exploring the Human Endeavor. In addition, the Harvard Art Museums are deeply grateful to the anonymous donor of a gift in memory of Melvin R. Seiden and to Malcolm H. Wiener (Harvard A.B. ’57, J.D. ’63) and Michael and Helen Lehmann for enabling us to mount this exhibition and to pursue the related research. This work was also made possible in part by the David M. Robinson Fund and the Andrew W. Mellon Publication Funds, including the Henry P. McIlhenny Fund.