

# VIRTUS

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## Obliging the Prince

Inaugural silverware gifts as instruments of political communication

169

Ines Elsner, *Das Huldigungssilber der Welfen des Jüngerer Hauses Braunschweig-Lüneburg. Geschenkkultur und symbolische Interaktion zwischen Landesherrschaft und Untertanen (1520-1706)* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2019, 256 p., ill., index)

This study was prompted by the 2009 auction of the vast collection of Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé, on which occasion a unique thirteen-piece set of mostly sixteenth and seventeenth century silverware emerged (fig. 1). These objects had a common provenance as inauguration gifts by various Northern German cities to regents from the Younger House of Guelph in their respective principalities. Although documentation attests that such gifts were common throughout the Holy Roman Empire and elsewhere, few have survived, and large sets even less. This reason alone warrants a thorough study like the present one, all the more since the set has (sadly) not remained together.

The magnificent objects that form the object of study are not particularly rare per se; their value as ‘cultural historical sensation’ derives from their documented function as inaugural gifts, and their coherence as a set. Individual examples of inaugural silverware gifts from other principalities are known, yet the present study sets out to examine whether such gifts were of special importance to the recipients, the ruling families, as insignia of their territorial power base. It does so by considering them in conjunction with archival sources, both from the part of the ruler, such as the well-preserved *Huldigungsakten* (inauguration acts), which document the scheduling, communication, organization, and course of the inaugurations, as well as documents by the local communities about the inauguration prac-

tices and procurement of the gifts. Together, they serve to shed light on their specific function within a broader gifting culture as ‘symbolic interaction’ between a ruling prince and his subjects. The period of study is demarcated as 1520-1706, from the first documented inauguration to the date of the silver chamber inventory which documents the presence of the objects in ducal possession (by lack of access to more recent sources). The book is abundant with well-chosen illustrations in colour and useful graphs. The inside cover features two very handy maps of the Guelph lands as held by the various branches of the family in 1648. The first map shows all the cities and towns that presented inaugural gifts to the dukes of the Younger House. On the second we find the sequence of the inauguration ceremonies of the two brothers Georg Wilhelm and Christian Ludwig of Braunschweig-Lüneburg in 1648.

170 The author, Ines Elsner, who previously published a monograph on the itinerant court of Frederick III/I of Brandenburg-Prussia and his Berlin residence landscape (Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag, 2012), has succeeded remarkably in weaving together the various fields of investigation required to approach such a multi-faceted topic. Elsner refers to Natalie Zemon Davies’ historical anthropology of the gift in sixteenth-century France (Oxford University Press, 2000, translated in German as *Die schenkende Gesellschaft*, Munich, 2002) and orients herself more broadly toward the current discourse on the ‘language of things’ (*Sprache der Dinge*). Her study, however, is more historical than anthropological in nature and stays very close to the sources, which are examined both quantitatively and qualitatively from a *longue durée* perspective.

In the first two chapters, the author situates her point of departure in the event of the auction and the available source material, and states the research questions and state of research. The first question coming to mind, as to how, where, and why the Guelph silverware-convolute survived, cannot be answered until permission is granted to consult the Hanoverian Royal House Archives. In the absence of this, and to the author’s barely veiled frustration, the study focuses on all questions relating to the context in which the objects originated, their financing by the gifting communities, their handing over and their meaning in the course of the ceremonial acts that constituted and perpetuated rulership. To this end chapter III defines the inauguration, its history and continuous tradition from the eighth until the eighteenth century. Chapter IV discusses the cultural practice of inaugural gifts, treating it as a special case of general gifting practices. Because, unlike most gift-giving which took place between parties of equal status, and which was consequently reciprocal, this case of unequal, vertical gift-giving, constituted a relation of dependency. As the origins of the tradition are hard to trace in written sources, Elsner turns to the visual tradition of representing the biblical gifts of the Three Magi to the Christ Child, in an attempt to explain the emergence in the late medieval period of the phenomenon of inaugural gifts of silverware.

While the survival of the Guelph silverware convolute is singular, it was otherwise not exceptional in nature. Chapter V deals with the performance of the inauguration. Using quantitative data from archival sources (i.e. inauguration acts), she distills a typology of exemplary Guelph inaugurations: direct inaugurations (in person), deputy inaugurations and those taking place at a later date. Chapter VI focuses on the gifts from the perspective of the givers and recipients, including those besides the prince, such as his family members, courtiers or deputies. Over time, and due in particular to the Thirty Years’ War, the depend-



Fig. 1. The fourteen-part silverware convolute from the collection Yves Saint Laurent/Pierre Bergé before its auctioneering in 2009 (photo Christie's Images/Bridgeman Images)

ence of cities from their prince increased. Finally, chapter VII treats the presented objects themselves and how they were employed in the performative act of the inauguration, their different types, provenance from different workshops, procurement channels, and financing. With an example from 1648, when the ducal chancery was particularly demanding, Elsner points out that the gifts' character as homage, tribute, obeisance, or even tax, should not be overlooked. The objects were not always made for the occasion, as existing ones often served as 'second hand' gifts by adapting or customizing them, for instance by changing heraldic signs. Wealthy merchant cities disposed of a collection of *Ratssilber* (council silver), which could function as a *Schenkbank* (gifting vault). This was a matter of foresight, reducing preparation time for the oft unexpected event of a change of regency. By way of an object biography of the so-called *Töbingpokal*, it is shown that a 'recycled' gift like this was actually valued for having a distinguished provenance from the Lüneburg council treasure. In the course of the seventeenth century, like elsewhere, gifts were diversified and individualized. In terms of the size, weight (in mark of silver), and value of their gifts, cities oriented themselves towards their peers of similar rank, taking care not to default (or not too much) compared to their previous gifts. Residence and/or garrison cities, burdened with the financing of recurring gifts and festivities, often got into a veritable debt-spiral. The reason why cities went to such great length to propitiate their *Landesherr* (ruling prince), was because inaugu-

ral gifts always accompanied petitions to alleviate local *Gravamina* (grievances). Local elites often disbursed the gifts from their own pockets, but not without self-interest as they vied for power, influence, offices and land.

The final three chapters start with drawing a conclusion (chapter VIII), which highlights how the objects bore witness to the sealing of a – once reciprocal – protection- and loyalty-pact. Inaugurations, with their concomitant *Mannzahl* (census of male citizens) and *Huldigungspflicht* (duty of homage) were important instruments of control, contributing to the consolidation of the early modern state. As *objekthafte Unterpfande* (thingly pledges), inaugural gifts embodied the symbiotic relation between protection on one part, and faithfulness and obedience on the other – and thus ultimately the constitutional reality of the early modern state. Their primary purpose was, besides the immanent commemorative and display value, monetary value as part of the state treasure. The latter aspect may explain the high rate of loss. What was gifted depended on availability, but also on what the neighboring city gave, what was customary, or what was demanded afterwards in case of failure. Decorum had to be preserved, as well as the traditional unwritten rules regarding precedence, reciprocity, and ceremony. By way of their nature, size, weight, and iconography, the objects conveyed messages to their recipient. They were expressions of the current state of relations, and appreciation of, or expectations from, the prince. In a quid pro quo, communities expected privileges, land, or offices in return. Elsner makes the important observation that: ‘in object form, socially unequal actors communicated symbolically at eye level’ (p. 174). Precisely in their mutual coherence as a set, these objects allowed the ruler to gauge at a glance the relative economic and political status of the cities and towns subject to him.

172

Chapter IX questions the role of the silverware gifts as means of princely representation. It is observed that, despite their considerable silver resources thanks to the Harz mining, in comparison to their Hohenzollern peers in Berlin, the Guelphs did not engage in comparable ostentation of their silver treasure (as far as the limited sources allow to gauge). On festive occasions silverware was displayed on special state furniture, the so-called *Kredenztafel* or *Schaubuffet*, an important feature of interior decoration, as attested by coloured design drawings and prints. Elsner raises the question why no such visual representations from the Guelph residences at Celle, Osnabrück, or Hanover are extant. She suggests, rather speculatively, that the Guelph ‘dynastic silver politic’ focused on generosity rather than displays of wealth, preferring other means of representation such as musical and theatrical performances.

In a final chapter X, dubbed ‘Outlook-Handing down’, Elsner asks once more why this particular set of silverware survived, when so many others which were melted down at some point or other. To answer this question, we must understand how these objects were handed down within the family over the centuries. Precisely this question of their transmission history cannot be answered conclusively, until the fully preserved silver inventories (eighteenth-twentieth centuries) in the Royal House Archives of the Guelphs in Hanover are finally made accessible. Nonetheless, a hypothesis is put forward as a base for future discussion: Elsner posits that at some point the immaterial value of the set must have surpassed its monetary worth. This was likely after the Prussian annexation in 1866, when King George V of Hanover maintained his territorial claims in exile in Vienna, to be underscored by the silver treasure. The later embroilment of the House of Guelph in twentieth-century politics, and

the dispersal of the famous Guelph Treasure (not treated by the author), may be the reason for the lamentable inaccessibility of the archives.

In sum, this type of study, which integrates archival work on events with the study of concrete material objects (events in and of themselves), is to be much applauded. The book is particularly rewarding in its analysis of the practical challenges of procuring appropriate gifts. As the objects under consideration are at once a token of power, a memorial object and a valuable item, the question how these different aspects weigh out against each other is still open for discussion. The book will be of interest to specialists of silverware, historians of early modern Germany, as well as urban and court historians. Besides offering a useful reference work, it provides a compelling argument that objects had a central role in early modern political communication.

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Kastelen in Zeeland, 1570-1670. Adellijke huizen en burgerlijke buitenverblijven 9

*Martin van den Broeke*

A monument for an English Queen. The genealogical programme on the tomb of Philippa of Hainault (d. 1369) at Westminster Abbey, London 41

*Sanne Frequin*

Lions or lilies? The dynastic identity of Margaret of Burgundy (1374-1441) as represented by material objects 61

*Margreet Brandsma*

