Tarnished Silver: Interpreting the Material Culture of the Atlantic Slave Trade Negotiations of 1715

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URL:

https://britishartstudies-21.netlify.app/tarnished-silver/

Citation (Chicago):

Bryant, Max. "Tarnished Silver: Interpreting the Material Culture of the Atlantic Slave Trade Negotiations of 1715." In *British Art Studies: Redefining the British Decorative Arts (Edited by Iris Moon)*. London and New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale Center for British Art, 2021. https://britishartstudies-21.netlify.app/tarnished-silver/.

Citation (MLA):

Bryant, Max. "Tarnished Silver: Interpreting the Material Culture of the Atlantic Slave Trade Negotiations of 1715." *British Art Studies: Redefining the British Decorative Arts (Edited by Iris Moon)*, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale Center for British Art, 2021, https://britishartstudies-21.netlify.app/tarnished-silver/.

BRITISH ART STUDIES
Issue 21 – November 2021 – November 2021

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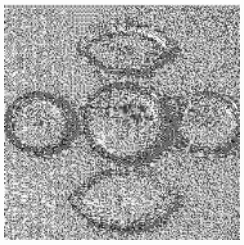

Article by **Max Bryant**
WORD COUNT:5,128

Abstract
This article describes the approach taken to interpreting, in a gallery setting, a set of silver with a troubling history: it had been made for use during negotiations of a major eighteenth-century contract for the transportation of enslaved Africans. Two further avenues for interpretation are presented, both of which relate to the Atlantic slave trade. The first follows the way that the "plain" surfaces of British silver of this period have been understood, while the second follows the physical transformation of the gilding. Both follow the "social life" of particular material properties of the silver, in an alternative approach to the well-established concept of the "social life of things".

Introduction

When the new British Galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) in New York were being arranged, in part with a goal of addressing contexts of slavery and colonialism, a set of early eighteenth-century silver presented a particularly acute challenge for members of the curatorial team. The set has been a highlight of the collection of the Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Art since its donation to the Met in 1968. But new research revealed a troubling chapter of what has become known, in material culture studies, as its "biography".[1] Issued in 1714 by the Royal Jewel House to the ambassador to Spain, the complete surviving set, now spread across international collections, comprises work by Phillip Rollos (circa 1660–after 1715), a Lutheran silversmith from Berlin, and Lewis Mettayer (d. 1740), a Huguenot who had grown up in London (figs. 1–4).[2] The troubling chapter was the context for its first use: the negotiations by which the new nation of Great Britain obtained the monopoly to transport enslaved Africans to the Spanish empire.

Figure 1

Phillip Rollos, *The Bingley Cup (Phillip Rollos produced an identical pair for Methuen, without the salver, in 1714)*, circa 1714, silver-gilt , 38 × 35.5 × 20.5 cm. Collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (M.30:1-2008). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

Figure 2

Lewis Mettayer, *Wine coolers made for Paul Methuen*, 1714, silver. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Sotheby's (all rights reserved).

Figure 3

Lewis Mettayer, *Casters made for Paul Methuen (this design was used by Lewis Mettayer as early as 1712)*, 1714, silver, 16.9 × 5.7 × 5.7 cm. 349 g. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1968 (68.141.71). Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).

Figure 4

Lewis Mettayer, *Dessert or salad plates (set of 5) made for Paul Methuen*, 1714, silver, variable. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1968 (68.141.288-292). Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).

Mettayer's casters and dessert plates in the British Galleries may be taken to demonstrate the formal originality and technical virtuosity that justify his work's prominent position in a global art museum. Both developed designs first identified in examples produced by his master David Willaume (1658–1741), a Huguenot from Metz, which, in turn, were probably based on lost French prototypes. With the casters, however, Mettayer reconceived the era's classic piriform, or pear-shaped, silhouette by inverting the lower half, so that the taper was moved to the bottom, and each edge of the octagonal base became a sinuous ogee (fig. 5). With the salvers, he reversed the typical form now known as a "strawberry dish" where folds around the edge produce a centripetal visual effect (fig. 6). Instead, Mettayer created an internal border, and disguised each fold with a cross of six round indentations that further emphasised the internal border's lateral movement (fig. 7). The result left the gilded centre as an uninterrupted disc, and allowed a unified set of dishes to be executed in a variety of shapes.

Figure 5

David Willaume, *Casters (David Willaume produced versions of this design as early as 1710)*, 1736, silver. Collection of the National Trust, Nostell Priory. Digital image courtesy of National Trust, Nostell Priory / Photo: Robert Thrift (all rights reserved).

Figure 6

Lewis Mettayer, *Silver serving dishes (set of 6) engraved with the Royal Arms of Queen Anne*, 1713, engraved silver, diameter 21.60 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1969,0705.29). Digital image courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Figure 7

Lewis Mettayer, *Dessert or salad plates (set of 5) made for Paul Methuen* (detail), 1714, silver, variable. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1968 (68.141.291). Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).

In the case of the casters and the salvers, then, Mettayer produced a design that was distinctively original compared to silver being made at that time. The ideal setting for the appreciation of these qualities was provided by the Galleries of English Decorative Arts, which opened at the Met in 1995 and were de-installed in 2016.[3] There Mettayer's work was shown alongside contemporary works in silver, in a wood-panelled side gallery devoted to the history of the medium from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth (fig. 8). But the formalist analysis embodied in the display in the Galleries of English Decorative Arts neglected to address the context of its use.

Figure 8

Methuen asiento silver shown in the "Galleries of English Decorative Arts" installed in 1995, photographed before deinstallation in 2016, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York / Photo: Peter Zeray (all rights reserved).

As I found by researching the first owner, the ambassador Paul Methuen (1672–1757), the silver objects had been manufactured for use in entertaining Spanish officials during negotiations by which the new nation of Great Britain obtained the *asiento* contract, the monopoly to transport enslaved Africans to the Spanish empire. The *asiento* itself had been granted to Britain from France in 1713, and the negotiations in Madrid in 1715 were for the new Whig government to establish the details of the arrangement on their own terms. The intended function of the silver was never fulfilled: owing to illness, Methuen returned prematurely from his embassy, leaving an assistant to successfully negotiate the agreements through bribery rather than magnificent hospitality. Nevertheless, the casters and dishes are intimately connected to the fate of the 63,206 enslaved people that British ships transported across the Atlantic in the subsequent two decades according to the agreement.[4]

The Met had not mentioned slavery in previous installations of the silver, and it was imperative to ask what interpretation of the work that meaningfully engaged this context would be possible. The first answer was to foreground the *asiento* in the label text, so that the aesthetic qualities could not be regarded in isolation. In gallery tours and discussions with docents, I also developed an interpretation that took advantage of the placement at a pivot point of the whole British Galleries. This interpretation focused on a change in status that happened immediately after the silver came back from Madrid, a change that dramatised more broadly the importance of the Atlantic slave trade for the shape of British society.

The *Asiento* Silver as a Pivot in the British Galleries

Diplomatic silver was ordered from the Royal Jewel House according to a very specific total weight of silver and silver-gilt. The careful monitoring of weight was intended to compel the ambassador to return it exactly as they had received it at the end of their mission. In the case of the Met's silver, Paul Methuen was able to get official dispensation in January 1716 to keep it as his personal property, as the result of his ascent into the inner circle of the Whig oligarchy.[5] At this point, according to the medieval law of entail, the silver could only be sold to the owner's own heir, except in cases of bankruptcy, preserving it in perpetuity from what might be termed "commodity" status. In its transformation into part of a personal estate, the silver manifested the social change by which Methuen, from a family of merchants descending from Scotland, recreated his own identity into that of a new member of the quasi-feudal British aristocracy. He would later acquire a country mansion, an heir and a baronetcy.

The Methuen *asiento* silver was placed alongside another set of gilded dishes, in this case made of porcelain, which told a parallel story (figs. 9 and 10). They were marked with the arms of the businessman Robert French (1705–1758). Like Methuen's, French's family originated in Scotland, but unlike Methuen's, his was aristocratic: the Lairds of Frenchland, Berwickshire. French's father had gone bankrupt, the family estates were sold, and Robert was forced to move to London, arriving in the 1730s when the economy was finally booming, thanks in considerable part to the ability to trade with Spain through the transportation of enslaved Africans to its empire. Robert French rebuilt the family fortune through commerce, and could celebrate his wealth through the uniquely global commodity of Chinese export porcelain.

Figure 9

Methuen asiento silver and Chinese export porcelain of Robert French, installed in the British Galleries, February 2020, case design by Roman and Williams, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Digital image courtesy of Max Bryant (all rights reserved).

Figure 10

After engravings by Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer, *Chinese export porcelain plate (set of 2), enamelled on the reverse for Robert French*, circa 1735–1740, hard-paste porcelain with gilding, 4.8 × 38.7 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (62.187.1). Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York / Photo: Peter Zeray (all rights reserved).

The connection between French's porcelain and Methuen's silver was visually embodied by their gilding, the latter having been achieved through the hazardous process of applying and heating an amalgam of mercury and gold. This substance probably contains some African gold, which was brought to the Mint by the Royal African Company and thereby to the Mint's neighbour at the Tower of London, the Royal Jewel House.[6] The fact that both families were Scottish in origin was a coincidence, but one that reinforced the significance of the change from "English" to "British" in the gallery's representation. Methuen and French can be read as emblematic "British" figures through which to conceptualise the union of England, Wales, and Scotland on a foundation of global trade, with the trade in enslaved people a central element.

Most importantly the parallel highlighted the difference between the changing identities of the objects. French's porcelain had been manufactured as an anonymous commodity in about 1735–1740, and only enamelled with the French family arms in about 1750. The enamelling was discreet, hidden on the back of the plate. While the addition of the crest asserted continuity, the personalised porcelain would have been a totally alien object to French's aristocratic ancestors. By contrast, the Methuen crest on the wine coolers (see fig. 2) is a prominent part of the design, and Mettayer's design for the casters also served to foreground the engraved Royal crest of George I more than the previous piriform shape had allowed. Silver, unlike porcelain, had played a prominent part in aristocratic dining for generations, and Methuen's silver established him within that milieu, along with the equally new Hanoverian dynasty.

The case containing Methuen's silver and French's porcelain was located at a threshold point in the galleries, between the larger rooms of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The objects in the display leading up to this point, which began its chronology in 1500, mostly represented the property of royalty or the landed aristocracy like the Lairds of Frenchland. In the later galleries, most of the objects had been owned initially by patrons whose fortunes derived from commerce and trade, like the Methuens, and who had used their wealth to assume a new aristocracy modelled on the old. This economic transformation affected the whole country, and a central condition was the direct involvement in the Atlantic slave trade embodied by the acquisition of the *asiento*.

By bringing these objects together, the Met's British Galleries were able to tell a story about the transformation of the British ruling class that was premised on the Atlantic slave trade, and to connect to that trade every object that came after this pivot in the galleries. The other story is told from the point of view of the 63,206 people from West Africa whose enslaved labour made possible this restructuring of British wealth and power. That story is a glaring omission in the case, and only objects made or used by these people could offer a sense of their history in relation to that told here. How such museum acquisitions could be made without participating in dispossession is an urgent question.

Using the *asiento* silver's changing commodity status to tell the story of broader social change is an application of one of the most ubiquitous ideas in the study of the decorative arts: the "social life of things"—Arjun Appadurai's theory that objects manifest social culture across time.[7] Objects previously only of interest to historians of design were, within this paradigm, revealed to be the most effective tool to illuminate a particular historical mode of life, or to use the vocabulary of Appadurai's source Werner Sombart, "*lebensgestaltung*".[8] An early and influential elaboration from 1982, titled "Mind in Matter", had already defined "material culture" as the "study through artefacts of the beliefs—values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society at a given time".[9] Much of the most important recent work on the British decorative arts in museums is conducted within this framework. One example is *Treasured Possessions*, an exhibition held in 2015 at the Fitzwilliam Museum. As the introduction states, objects are invested with emotional content by their patrons and consumers, and so we can treat "things as clues to a whole culture", in this case, the culture of early modern Europe.[10] One way to read these "clues" is to look, as in the example discussed here, at transformations in commodity status.

The ubiquity and the age of the "social life of things" might suggest a state of irrelevance, but it is in fact still generating debate and controversy. In 2015 Rosemary Joyce and Susan Gillespie proposed replacing the idea of an object's "biography" with its "itinerary".[11] The similar concept admits of the potential for change in what constitutes the identity of an object, incorporating digital reproduction, for example, or groups of multiple objects. In the February 2021 issue of *British Art Studies*, as well as in *The Brutish Museums* (2020), Dan Hicks of the Pitt Rivers Museum took aim at the "social life of things" altogether, making the idea representative of a broader approach to history that he sought to dismantle, describing it, pejoratively, as "contemplative".[12] More recently, Ann-Sophie Lehmann has mounted a defence of the concept against both of the above camps, arguing that its own life has been much longer and more complex than has been recognized.

In the next two sections of this article, I offer my own alteration of the concept in order to find further connections between the Met's silver and the Atlantic slave trade. The treatment of the objects so far discussed regarded them as unified totalities, defined by their transformations in

commodity status. By contrast, the following approach treats them as collections of material properties that can be isolated and considered individually. Material properties all change across time in different ways, whether physically or through the changing perspectives of those by whom they are experienced. Two particular material properties are chosen here that both illuminate aspects of the Atlantic slave trade: first the silver's "plainness", and second its gilding.

I. Reflections on "Plain" Style

The innovations in Mettayer's casters and dessert plates discussed in the introduction all served to emphasise areas of sheer surface, unembellished with chasing or engraving. Unlike in contemporary French silver, for example, it is possible in these works to experience the effect of the material in an apparently neutral way, presented unadorned across a wide area, whether a surface of silver or of silver-gilt. In the nineteenth century these qualities began to be understood as an aspect of the style of the "plain, perhaps too plain, plate of William and Queen Anne", in the words of the founder of English silver studies, Wilfred Joseph Cripps.[13] But material properties of an object transform through acts of reinterpretation, acts which are particularly revealing when they attempt to project aspects of the original context of production that have become obscure.

It is difficult to make an account of the social context for the silver trade from the evidence that has survived, but it appears to have comprised figures from a variety of backgrounds. Masters came from a range of countries: many were first-generation Huguenot immigrants from provincial France, but there were also Berliners like Rollos, and the children of immigrants like Mettayer, who had been raised in London and whose family had no background in the French silver trade. Beyond the named masters there would have been a further society of apprentices and assistants. Recent scholarship has shown that Huguenot masters trained roughly equal numbers of English apprentices alongside fellow Huguenots, and between 1709 and 1725, Mettayer trained five of the former and two of the latter.[14]

The backgrounds of the non-Huguenots who were trained as apprentices and employed as workshop assistants were probably even more diverse than those of the masters. A major transformation followed this period: the first known example of racist employment legislation in Britain, which was passed by the Lord Mayor of London in 1731. According to the proclamation, no Freeman could train "Negroes or other Blacks".[15] Such a proclamation would have been unnecessary if there had not been leading up to that date a number of such apprentices, presumably creating competition with white applicants for the same roles. The British acquisition of the *asiento* had made the dehumanising treatment of Africans the official policy of an elected government, setting the precedent for further discrimination.

In the two decades leading up to 1731, London represented a particularly diverse city due to its involvement in global trade, and while there is no evidence of people from Africa involved in silver manufacture, we can say at least that until 1731 there was the possibility for such training. In his print *Noon* (1738) Hogarth showed rich Huguenots living in the St Giles area alongside a Londoner of African heritage. In 1710 the German bibliophile Zacharias von Uffenbach visited, and wrote that "there are … such a quantity of Moors of both sexes in England that I have never seen before".[16] But we know hardly any of their names, with rare exceptions like George Turner, a fencing-master in Southwark in 1710.[17]

As silver scholarship developed, a narrative of this era began to solidify. In particular, the community of London crafts began to be portrayed as a binary of Huguenots against local craftsmen. Hugh Tait, for example, presented Huguenot silversmiths as a closed community,

producing a self-contained genre of "Huguenot silver", based on the incorrect assertion that those silversmiths never trained non-Huguenot apprentices.[18] Protestants like Rollos from places other than France were misidentified as Huguenot.[19] One distinctive form of this era, the two-handled cup represented by the works by Rollos in the Methuen set, became misidentified as a Huguenot import.[20] A craft community that was made up of a number of identities became treated as a site of conflict between a closed community of Huguenots and a closed community of native Londoners.

This binary treatment of identity influenced the interpretation of the material properties of their productions. Huguenot culture produced work that was "functional" and emphasised "practical use".[21] The plain surfaces, therefore, were expressions of a Calvinist ethic specific to this culture. However, this was not the only way to interpret this material property: another might be as a response by a diverse community to shared material conditions. Such an approach would not foreclose the possibility of participation in the field by the kinds of people who would later be explicitly excluded by the racist employment legislation of 1731.

There is also historical justification to believe that the "plainness" of work like the *asiento* silver was not an expression of a specifically Huguenot aesthetic. A major change that affected everyone involved in the silver trade, whatever their cultural or ethnic background, was the legal minimum millesimal fineness. The government regulated the very material that silversmiths worked with by making them bring their work to the Assay Office at the Goldsmiths' Hall for testing and stamping. Until 1697, silversmiths were trained in and practised with sterling silver, the silver alloy used in coins that comprised 92.5 per cent pure silver, and 7.5 per cent copper or other metal. However, in March that year Parliament abolished the sterling standard for silverware in England, and replaced it with the French standard of 95.8 per cent silver, now known as "Britannia".

The key problem this introduced was the increase in the cost of the material, as the Act had been introduced in order to prevent the silver in coins being used to make silver plate. A key line of business for silversmiths was the replacement of elements within sets, and a craftsman might be asked to recreate a design made before the passing of the Act of 1697. It seems that what happened was that the silversmith kept the same amount of silver, and removed an additional quantity of alloy, to the point that while there was less material overall, the ratio of silver to alloy had been increased. A replacement would have to be created by subtly changing the design, removing material from invisible areas so it would appear identical, though it would be about 10 per cent lighter than the original.[22]

A corollary to this challenge was that designs native to the new standard had to convey the same magnificent impression to which clients were accustomed, but with less overall silver alloy. But there was a property of the new 95.8 per cent standard that offered a solution: its greater facility for creating surfaces of sheer silver.[23] The copper in the sterling alloy had a tendency to come to the surface of the mixture during the cooling process to produce what is called "fire staining". This was a routine fact of manufacture that was removed in the finishing process. After polishing it left a patch of whiter-looking colour, and the surface itself was not perfectly smooth, which was not an issue when the surface was embellished with applied ornament. The new standard of silver, because of the lower copper content in the alloy, was much less likely to produce fire staining. This material condition made possible the large unornamented surfaces that characterise the works by Mettayer in the Methuen *asiento* silver.

The interpretation of the plain style of silver formulated by Tait and others presented these unornamented surfaces as a cultural expression of a specifically Huguenot identity. Another

interpretation, presented here, is one that does not preclude the possibility of its emergence from a diverse craft community in response to a shared material circumstance, in this case the new silver standard. A material property can be seen to have a "social life" of its own, its interpretation changing according to differing attempts to accommodate a lack of historical evidence about its production.

This lack of historical evidence, however, is important in itself. Legislation like the proclamation of 1731 targeted particular ethnicities, and erased their prior, as well as their future, participation in crafts. Historical evidence that could have been used to understand the community of silversmiths in the early eighteenth century was thereby lost, and the interpretation of their productions has had to accommodate that erasure. Furthermore, a culturally monolithic craft community has been projected from a perspective postdating the establishment of racist employment legislation. We therefore have to deliberately perform acts of reinterpretation in order to stop projecting that perspective onto our perception of the material properties of these objects. It may be said that the British acquisition of the *asiento*, by indirectly impacting the ethnic composition of craft communities, also established a principle that continues to shape the reinterpretation of their productions.

II. The Physical Transformation of Silver-Gilt

A material property of an object transforms across time, and also through the physical change it undergoes according to its various uses. The faded vermeil of the *asiento* silver may be taken as a particularly rich example, and one that makes a connection with the Atlantic slave trade. We know also that none of the silver gilt was melted down, and that despite much handling it was never regilt: the Royal cyphers are still engraved into the gold. This suggests two stages in the life of the gilding: the first where it was handled, and a second where it was preserved. Both may be read as reflecting a specific social context in the early eighteenth century: that of Methuen's Whig allies who profited by the British acquisition of the *asiento*.

Of the recipients for official plate, ambassadors were granted the largest allocation, totalling 195 kg.[24] They were also the only recipients of gilt plate, which comprised 30 kg of this total. It was up to the ambassadors themselves to determine which pieces would be made in silver and which in silver-gilt. These quantities of relative weight had been established in 1668, during the reign of Charles II, and had remained unchanged despite the increase in cost that resulted from the new silver standard in 1697. Charles II established a company with a monopoly on trade with West Africa as soon as he returned to assume the crown after the dissolution of the Commonwealth, making his younger brother, the Duke of York, its governor. The direct provision for silver-gilt reflected the confidence that the new monopoly would facilitate Royal access to gold, and indeed the gilding on the ambassadorial silver may have comprised gold provided by the Royal African Company to the Mint from 1670.

We know almost all of the items that Methuen chose to have made in silver-gilt because they have survived: the dishes weigh 12.7 kg, the casters 1.3 kg, the pair of covered cups 15.5 kg, coming to a total weight close to 30 kg, which is the maximum that could have been ordered.[25] Therefore it is possible to interpret what Methuen considered to be the silver-gilt objects worth acquiring for his mission. For example, he cannot have had any chapel accoutrements made, the original purpose of the provision for silver-gilt. Methuen was still issued with the standard perquisites to equip an Anglican chapel in Madrid, including an altar cloth, surplices, prayer books, and a Bible. But he must have completely forgone any gilt chalices or monstrances.

Instead, he ordered gilt casters and dessert plates, and the faded state of the original gilding in the Met examples reflects this different context for use.

The largest objects ordered in silver-gilt were the covered cups, the centrepieces of the sideboard buffet. These were an obvious choice of object to have made in silver-gilt, particularly as Methuen's Tory predecessor had ordered the same designs; a Whig sideboard could not be allowed to suffer in comparison. However, the rest of the buffet must have been in ungilt silver, including the standard pieces like a cistern and fountain, ewers, basins, vases, and large decorative drinking vessels. Methuen also chose not to have salvers made en suite with the cups as his predecessor had done, saving that weight of silver-gilt for other items.

Instead of gilding objects that would have been on static display in the embassy chapel or on the sideboard, Methuen's provision for silver-gilt was used for objects that would have been handled by diners: casters and dessert plates. As soon as they were held, the difference from silver would also have been obvious from their weight. Even if silver-gilt was much less heavy than solid gold, it was considerably heavier than ungilt silver, thanks to the thick layer of gold applied during fire-gilding, which is greater than that added by other techniques.

This material property of the casters and dessert plates reflected their changing social context. Gold had increasingly been in the hands of the same British consumers who would have dined with Methuen, in the form of the relatively new currency of "guineas". The coin's name, and the elephant stamped on its reverse, indelibly associated gold with Africa, even if only a fraction of the gold coming into the Mint was provided by the Royal African Company.[26] Rather than being an object of distanced admiration, as it was in the chapel and on the sideboard, gold was becoming an object that was handled and exchanged. A stamp on all the casters and dessert plates would have reinforced this association between wrought plate and currency. This was the figure of Britannia, which from 1697 denoted wrought plate that met the new legal standard of silver (fig. 11). The stamp used by the Assay Office was tiny, but the image would have been familiar from the low denomination farthing, a coin in daily use, which had featured the figure on its reverse since 1672.

Figure 11

Lewis Mettayer, *Casters made for Paul Methuen (this design was used by Lewis Mettayer as early as 1712)* (detail), 1714, silver, 16.9 × 5.7 × 5.7 cm. 349 g. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1968 (68.141.71). Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).

However, the association of gold with currency was undergoing a transformation at the time of Methuen's acquisition. At first the value of guineas floated independently of the silver unit of account, the shilling. Because of the practice of shillings being clipped, which peaked in the 1690s, the guinea came to be adopted as the preferred currency for the businessmen who were a core contingent of the Whigs. The Mint could not obtain silver to produce enough shillings to redress the balance, and in 1717, after various attempts by governments to defend silver coins from undervaluation, the guinea effectively became itself the unit of account.[27] In the 1690s there had been less than half as much gold as silver in the total currency; by the recoinage of 1774, gold completely dominated the ratio.[28] The words "gold" and "money" began to be used interchangeably by writers on economics like David Hume.[29]

The second change was in the concept of precious metals as sources of value. To increase the purchasing power of silver coins, the government could have done what all others did in this period: mint coins with less silver in them. Fiat currency was standard practice internationally, as well as in Britain.[30] However, this policy was broken during the coinage crisis of 1695, a historical change of policy that would have a global impact. Breaking with the classic Aristotelian view of money as purely conventional, John Locke argued that in fact the gold and silver within it possessed what he called "intrinsic value", a value instilled in it by social convention that dated back to an era before the emergence of civil society, but after the transition from the state of nature.[31] Money therefore had to be depoliticised, that is, removed from the control of the government, in order to support the bonds of civil society itself.[32] Most immediately this meant clipped coins were reminted at the old Elizabethan standard. The merit of

Locke's recoinage plan was challenged by its own economic consequences: almost immediately the economy suffered, with the London cloth market shrinking by nearly a fifth in the following year. Britain's prosecution of the Nine Years War was definitively undermined, and William III was forced to accept a treaty with few gains in 1697. The government created the South Sea Company as a shell to produce credit notes; this shell company in turn created the immediate motivation for the acquisition of the *asiento*.

What is remarkable about the following two decades is that with all the tangible demonstration of the limitations of Locke's monetary policy, it should have been not only continued but entrenched by successive Whig governments. Tying silver and gold together in 1717 only confirmed that both possessed an intrinsic value that was in direct relation, ending the Mint's interventions with the value of the guinea. These policies established an association between economic prosperity and the intrinsic value of precious metals, and the conception of "sound money" is something for which economists continue to credit Locke.[33]

We may understand the faded gilding on the Met's *asiento* silver as expressive of this transformation. This ambassadorial silver-gilt was handled and touched, rather than ceremonially used in an Anglican chapel, in part because gold was taking on new meaning at the time. The life of the gilding also includes the fact that it was neither melted down nor regilt, but allowed to fade in its original form. This life can be interpreted to materialise a transformation in gold's significance to the objects' users, from a new and powerful form of currency to a representation of value itself. The British acquisition of the *asiento* was likewise a direct condition of the Whig project to depoliticise the currency at any cost, in which the preservation of the intrinsic value of gold and silver was prioritised over that of human lives.

Conclusion

Through an alternative application of the "social life of things", changes in the material properties of objects can be seen to offer their own form of historical evidence. In the first example given, the reinterpretations of the silver's plainness register the consequences of the *asiento*, in particular the losses in knowledge that it produced and the historical projections onto the past that it influenced. In the second example, the physical transformation of a material property records a social usage that manifests the emergence of a new perspective on gold and silver intimately tied to the circumstances of the *asiento* contract.

Decorative arts collections abound with objects whose biographies entirely preclude neutral formalist appreciation, and the question of whether these objects can endure any form of public display is one that curators have to work to answer through the interpretations they present. Most at stake is whether any meaningful historical understanding can be derived from an encounter with them in person. In short, we have to ask whether what the objects have to tell us about our shared history is something expressed in the material qualities that influenced their accession by museums of art.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Iris Moon, Luke Syson, Ellenor Alcorn, Christopher Bowen, and Sophie Pitman.

About the author

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Footnotes

1. Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process", in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–94. See also Serena Dyer, "State of the Field: Material Culture", *History: The Journal of the Historical Association* 106, no. 370 (2021). DOI:10.1111/1468–229X.13104.
2. The former provided a pair of covered cups (fig. 1); the latter, two wine coolers, three casters, and seventeen dessert plates (figs. 2, 3 and 4). Mettayer's wine coolers repeated a design first produced by his master, but the casters and dessert plates seem to have been his own invention. See Anon., *Fine Old English Silver Plate: The Property of Field-Marshal The Rt. Hon. Lord Methuen* (London: Christie, Manson & Woods, 1920). The covered cups and wine coolers are in private collections, the casters are at the Met, and the dessert plates are split between the Met and the Royal Collection.
3. M. Bryant, "A History of the British Galleries", in "The New British Galleries", special issue, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 77, no. 4 (Spring 2020): 31–39.
4. V.G. Sorsby, "British Trade with Spanish America under the Asiento" (PhD thesis, University College, London, 1975), 277.
5. Treasury Warrants: January 1716, 16–20. *Calendar of Treasury Books*, vol. 30, 1716 (originally published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1958).
6. K.G. Davies, *The Royal African Company* (London: Longmans, 1970), 181.
7. Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value", in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Appadurai, 3–63.
8. Werner Sombart, *Luxus und Kapitalismus* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1912), 171.
9. Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method", *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 1.
10. Peter Burke, "The Meaning of Things in the Early Modern World", in *Treasured Possessions: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. Victoria Avery, Melissa Calaresu, and Mary Laven (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2015), 3.
11. Rosemary A. Joyce and Susan D. Gillespie, eds., *Things in Motion: Object Itineraries in Anthropological Practice* (Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press, 2015).
12. Dan Hicks, "Necrography: Death-Writing in the Colonial Museum", *British Art Studies* 19 (February 2021). DOI:10.17658/issn.2058–5462/issue-19/conversation; Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 41.
13. Wilfred Joseph Cripps, *Old French Plate* (London: John Murray, 1880), 30.
14. Lien Bich Luu, *Immigrants and the Industries of London 1500–1700* (London: Ashgate, 2005), 247.
15. Quoted in P. Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 77.
16. Fryer, *Staying Power*, 77–78.

17. Fryer, *Staying Power*, 77–78.
18. See, for example, Hugh Tait, "London Huguenot Silver", in *Huguenots in Britain and Their French Background, 1550–1800*, ed. Irene Scouloudi (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987).
19. The identification was corrected in John Culme, *British Silver Boxes 1640–1840*: *The Lion Collection* (Woodbridge: ACC Art Books, 2014).
20. Hugh Tait, "The Advent of the Two-Handled Cup", *Society of Silver Collectors: The Proceedings 1976–1979* 2, nos. 11/13 (Spring 1982): 202–210.
21. Tessa Murdoch, "Huguenot Artists Designers and Craftsmen in Great Britain and Ireland. 1680–1760" (PhD thesis, Westfield College University of London, 1982), 8.
22. See for example MMA 68.141.309a, b and 68.141.310a, b.
23. Personal correspondence with silversmith Christopher Bowen, March 2021.
24. Helen Jacobsen, *Luxury and Power: The Material World of the Stuart Diplomat 1660–1714* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 14.
25. Jacobsen, *Luxury and Power*, 14.
26. Davies, *The Royal African Company*, 181.
27. Christine Desan, *Making Money: Coin, Currency, and the Coming of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 384.
28. Desan, *Making Money*, 385.
29. Desan, *Making Money*, 409.
30. William Lowndes, *A Report Containing An Essay for the Amendment of the Silver Coins* (London, 1695), 56.
31. John Locke, *Further Considerations concerning Raising the Value of Money* (London, 1695).
32. Stefan Eich, "John Locke and the Politics of Monetary Depoliticization", *Modern Intellectual History* 17, no. 1 (2020): 1–28 (17).
33. Eich, "John Locke and the Politics of Monetary Depoliticization", 17.

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Imprint

Author	Max Bryant
Date	30 November 2021
Category	Article
Review status	Peer Reviewed (Double Blind)
License	Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)
Downloads	PDF format
Article DOI	https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-21/mbryant
Cite as	Bryant, Max. "Tarnished Silver: Interpreting the Material Culture of the Atlantic Slave Trade Negotiations of 1715." In *British Art Studies: Redefining the British Decorative Arts (Edited by Iris Moon)*. London and New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale Center for British Art, 2021. https://britishartstudies-21.netlify.app/tarnished-silver/.