Ewer and basin
Place of origin: Venice (made)
Date: ca. 1580 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Silver-gilt, raised, chased, embossed and cast
Credit Line: Dr W.L. Hildburgh Bequest
Museum number: M.237&A-1956
Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 62, The Foyle Foundation Gallery, case 12

Public access description
Ewer and basin sets were originally used for hand washing during meals. The design of this ewer, however, is impractical. It would have been impossible to use as a vessel due to its weight, its small foot and its awkwardly-placed handle. Both the ewer and the basin are lavishly decorated with images of classical deities surrounded by strapwork patterns and embossed designs of fruit and foliage. Heavy, elaborately decorated objects like these were not functional but were made solely for display and would have been seen at grand dinners held by fashionable Venetians.

Descriptive line
Ewer and basin, silver-gilt, Italy (Venice), about 1580

Physical description
Ewer, silver-gilt, with classical urn-shaped body on small round foot, a cast mask and headdress forming the neck and spout and a cast figure forming the handle. The body decorated with chased and embossed unidentified classical scenes surrounded by strapwork patterns and designs of fruit and foliage. Basin, silver-gilt, the inner section chased and embossed with three scenes containing amorini riding sea-horses, the outer section with six scenes, three similar to the ewer interspersed with three showing a horse, stag and bull. Bolted to the recessed centre is a round medallion with two classical female figures supporting a plain oval shield.

Dimensions
Height: 43.9 cm ewer, Width: 18.7 cm ewer, including handle, Diameter: 16.6 cm ewer, of body, Weight: 2.67 kg ewer, Diameter: 67.5 cm basin, Depth: 7.5 cm basin, Weight: 3.74 kg basin

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Object history note
Entered the Museum's collections as part of the bequest of the American-born collector, Walter Leo Hildburgh, in 1956.

Historical significance: An almost identical copper-gilt ewer and basin (the subjects of the decoration are different) are in the Kunstgewerbmuseum in Berlin, believed by Hayward to be by the same unknown goldsmith (see References).

Historical context note
Before the second half of the 16th century when the use of personal forks at the dining table became widely established across Italy, dining could be a very messy affair. Although knives and spoons were in frequent use, forks were largely confined to the final "banqueting" course, for eating sticky sweetmeats and fruits. As a result the ceremony of handwashing took on great significance. At the beginning and end of a meal, a ewer and basin were brought to the dining table by servants so that diners could wash their greasy hands from a basin replenished with flower-scented water poured from the ewer. Since basins were brought to each guest and appreciated at close range, they were often elaborately decorated.

By the time this ewer and basin were made most wealthy Italian households would have used forks on a regular basis for grand dining occasions, limiting the need for handwashing. This pair was therefore probably made for public show, a demonstration of magnificence, rather than for use. This is also suggested by the top-heavy design of the ewer, rendering it impractical. The large size, gliding and fashionable hammered decoration of the pieces would have advertised to guests the wealth and taste of the owner. They would probably have been placed in a prominent position on a credenza (a form of dresser, often a temporary tiered structure erected for specific occasions) alongside other silver and silver-gilt vessels in the same room where the meal was taking place.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O118400/ewer-and-basin-unknown/