Tazza

Place of origin: Utrecht (made)

Date: 1612 (made)

Artist/Maker: Vianen, Adam Van, born 1569 - died 1627 (maker)

Materials and Techniques: silver

Museum number: 2125-1855

Gallery location: Europe 1600-1815, Room 6, The Lisa and Bernard Selz Gallery, case CA2

Public access description

The maker's mark (monogram 'AV') on the outer rim of this silver vessel is almost certainly that of the Dutch silversmith Adam van Vianen (d. 1627). Adam spent his entire life in or around Utrecht, where he initially trained as an engraver. This shallow bowl on a footed stem, a type of vessel referred to by the Italian term 'tazza', is one of the earliest examples of Adam's work and it dates from 1612. Its form and decoration owe much to sixteenth-century styles of ornament inspired by the Classical Roman world. However, the flowing, flattened faces round the foot, and the curious motifs between the scrolling leaves that frame the central scene in the bowl, foreshadow the fluid forms that would make Adam famous. He and his brother, Paulus (who worked at various prestigious European courts) became famous for their fantastically-formed silver cups, vases and dishes (a style which modern scholars refer to as 'auricular').

Tazzas were originally made in glass, in sixteenth-century Venice, but goldsmiths soon copied the form in precious metal. Sixteenth and seventeenth-century paintings show glass and metalwork tazzas being used to drink wine at table, or to serve delicacies such as biscuits, candied fruits, or fruit. The detailed scenes which decorate the bowls of precious metal examples suggest that many were also objects to be displayed and admired.

Descriptive line

Silver, Netherlands (Utrecht), 1612, Adam van Vianen

Physical description

Silver, raised, embossed and chased, the bowl of the tazza embossed with the Old Testament scene 'The Judgment of Solomon' (3 Kings 3, verses 16-28).

Dimensions

Weight: 612.2 g, Height: 16.6 cm, Diameter: 20.4 cm diameter of bowl, Diameter: 10 cm diameter of base

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Object history note

The identity of the maker and the date of the piece have been interpreted in two different ways because the monogram 'AV' was used by both Adam and later by his son Christian van Vianen. The date-letter 'R' was also used on two occasions by the Utrecht authorities for the years 1612 and 1634. The German scholar and hallmark specialist Marc Rosenberg first identified the 'AV' monogram as the mark of the Utrecht silversmith Adam van Vianen (died ca. 1627) and the date-letter 'R' as that of the year 1612 (Rosenberg: 1911, no. 4822: he noted the other two marks, but stated they were illegible). In his revised and expanded edition of the work (1928, vol. III.iv, no. 7721), he rejected his earlier attribution of the tazza and identified the mark as that of Adam's son, Christian van Vianen (died 1667). His reattribution appears to be based on a reinterpretation of the date letter to the year 1634. The attribution to Christian is followed by E. Alfred Jones, who declared the tazza 'the only piece of silver which can be said to have been made by van Vianen in England', and dated it to 1635 (Jones (1935), p. 84). However, the Dutch silver expert J. R. Ter Molen recently compared images of these marks with ones on a piece marked for Utrecht in 1610. The similarity of the town marks and the form of the punch used for the date-letters confirm the date-letter on the tazza as 1612 (see correspondence in object folder, Metalwork Section).

The stylistic and iconographic features of the tazza itself also support a dating of 1612. The strapwork and fruit motifs on the stem of the tazza recall late sixteenth-century designs (particularly those on a 1594 covered cup, also by Adam), and the figures, dressed in early-sixteenth-century costume, recall the work of the engraver Lucas van Leyden and, in particular, the work of the Utrecht painter Anthonie van Blocklandt (died Utrecht 1583; see: de Jonge (1937), pp. 102-3; Frederiks (1952), I, no. 49 ) pp. 78-9; ter Molen (1984), II, no. 407, p. 80); De Utrechtse edelsmeden Van Vianen (1984), no. 56 (p. 72). The foot of the bowl is almost certainly by Adam as well, and may have been made at a slightly earlier date (de Jonge (1937), p. 102).

Adam van Vianen (born perhaps in Utrecht, 1569; died probably Utrecht, 1627) trained as an engraver but became known for his skill as a silversmith. Nothing is known of his work before 1612, and he remained in, or close to, Utrecht all his life (unlike his brother Paulus, also a silversmith, who was employed at various European courts).

The tazza was originally part of the collection amassed by the politician, statesman and collector Ralph Bernal (1783 - 1854), which had been housed at his home in Eaton Square, London. (For Bernal see Davies [2004]). At Bernal's death, the Society of Arts and John Charles Robinson, one of the curators of the South Kensington Museum (as the V&A was then known) attempted to persuade the British government...
to buy the whole collection for the Museum, but their campaign was unsuccessful. Bernal's collection was put to auction at Christie's in 1855. The Museum bid successfully for this tazza, paying the sum of £45 10s. The previous history and ownership of the tazza is unknown, although the 1795 Utrecht tax mark, stamped in between the earlier marks, proves the piece was still in a Utrecht collection in the late eighteenth century.

Adam van Vianen and his brother Paulus developed an extraordinarily fluid style of silversmithing which modern British scholars have termed 'auricular', but which in the seventeenth-century Netherlands was known as 'whims and drolleries' ('fratsen en snaeckeryen'). It consists of fantastic, curving forms and figures that make a solid silver vessel appear in a liquid, flowing state. These forms evolved from the so-called 'grotesque' ornament discovered during excavations of the Emperor Nero's palace in 1480s Rome, and emerge in engravings of the late 1590s. The van Vianen brothers, particularly Adam, became renowned among contemporaries for translating this 'auricular' style into striking pieces of silverware. This tazza, however, is good example of Adam's early work and its form and decoration are very much in the tradition of mid-sixteenth-century motifs inspired by the Classical world (such as the acanthus leaf ornament on the underside of the bowl, the baluster forms of the stem or the leaf patterns round the base of the foot). His skill at working figures in extremely shallow relief is evident in the scene in the bowl, where the perspective effects of the architectural setting give the illusion that the figures in the foreground are raised in high relief. Some elements, such as the flowing, flattened faces round the foot, or the curious motifs between the scrolling leaves that frame the central scene in the bowl, foreshadow the fluid forms that would make Adam famous.

**Historical context note**

This vessel is of a type that has come to be known by the Italian word 'tazza'. The form -- a shallow bowl set on a central stem -- originated in sixteenth-century Venice and tazzas were originally made in Venetian glass. They served as wine glasses, because their wide, flat bowls brought the liquid into as much contact with the air as possible, and thereby allowed wine to breathe. They could also be used to serve small, sugary sweets, biscuits or fruit. Goldsmiths copied the form of the tazza, and by the end of the sixteenth century the bowls and stem were elaborately embossed and chased. (See Gruber (1980), pp. 70-72). The increasingly detailed decoration on these pieces made them less functional: highly-wrought examples would probably have been reserved for display rather than for use.

**URL**

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O377012/tazza-vianen-adam-van/