

THE LIMNER COMPANY



AUSTRIAN SCHOOL (17th century)

Two 'schraubtalers' which each unscrew to reveal a portrait with mica overlays

Circa: circa 1653

AUSTRIAN SCHOOL (17th century)

A schraubtaler which unscrews to reveal a portrait of a Gentleman, wearing ermine collar and an ermine-lined crimson cap, and eight mica overlays, each representing a different European leaders*;
circa 1653

The coin a 1628 Salzburg ½ thaler, the miniature watercolour on vellum, the overlays watercolour on mica

Circular, 40 mm (1 5/8 in) diam.

*A. King Frederick III of Denmark (1609-1670), inscribed 'Denn/m'.

B. King Charles II of England (1630-1685), inscribed 'ENGEL/LAND'.

C. Kaspar von der Leyen, Elector Archbishop of Trier (1618-1676), inscribed 'Trier'.

D. Possibly Queen Christina of Sweden (1626-1689), indistinct inscription.

E. Probably Leopold I, Holy Roman Emperor (1640-1705), inscribed 'Impera'.

F. King John II Casimir Vasa of Poland (1609-1672), inscribed 'Pollon[jia]'.

G. King Philip IV of Spain (1605-1665), inscribed 'Hi' [Hispania].

H. Possibly Charles X Gustav, Alfonso VI, or Johann de Witt.

and

GERMAN SCHOOL (17th century)

A schraubtaler which unscrews to reveal a portrait of a Lady, with seven mica overlays, each depicting a different costume†; circa 1650

The coin a 1639 Augsburg thaler, the miniature watercolour on vellum, the overlays watercolour on mica.

Circular, 40 mm (1 5/8 in) diam.

†A. Dress with Scalloped collar and red bows, two-feather headpiece.

B. Red corset with white underlay, large hat.

C. Blue and white dress, white ribbon in hair.

D. White scalloped dress with red buttons, red earrings and heart decoration.

E. Yellow dress with white cloth headpiece.

F. White dress with black bows, a single-feather headpiece.

G. Black dress, black cap with two feathers.

Schraubtalers (screw thalers) are uniquely tangible works of art, formed of taler coins which unscrew to reveal portraits and scenes, and are sometimes, as in these two cases, paired with sets of mica overlays which allow the portrait to be 'dressed up'. Thalers were used as currency in the Holy Roman and Habsburg Empires from the 16th to the 19th centuries. The location of their production is concurrent with the tradition of producing Schraubtalers, which emerged in what is now Austria and Germany in the middle of the 16th century. In the present examples, the portraits are painted on vellum, though other examples contain engraved portraits and likenesses painted in oil on copper were popular before vellum portraits were first used.

In order to produce these items, two coins were taken, halved, and hollowed out. A thread would then have been added along the edge to allow them to be screwed together. This process of production means that not all *schraubtalern* are made from the 'same' coin (i.e. two separate versions of the same coin, so that this looks like the original coin at the end of the process), but in these two examples, the silversmith was able to match up pairs of sides of the identical thalers.

As a result of this process, the *schraubtalers* look just like unmodified coins, making them a highly secretive and personal way to contain the message or picture found inside. It appears that these objects were produced for multiple reasons, including religious worship and marriage. Some also contained explicit scenes, and therefore acted as a predecessor to the erotic snuffbox of the early 18th

century. It is likely that the Augsburg thaler with a portrait of a lady was produced for this very reason. Her costumes are simply a selection of outfits worn by women in the period, which explains why those with feathers seem to be similar. In some cases, these works of art would have contained a portrait of both husband and wife, such as the example by Gerrit Lundens in the Rijksmuseum.[1] The thaler would have been given to a prospective husband to give him a sense of what his future wife would look like in different outfits.

This places the Augsburg Thaler in the wider tradition of 17th century 'dress-up' portraits grouped with mica talcs. Though some of these do depict known sitters, such as King Charles II and Henrietta Maria, many depict unknown women with a variety of different outfits to dress them up in. It is possible that the portrait was originally grouped with more talcs than the seven that are currently extant; these are extremely delicate and easily damaged or lost. Of the talcs that do remain, at least three of these show similar outfits with feathered headdresses and dresses with slightly different necklines. The other outfits are more varied, and put the sitter in different hats which appear to be more traditional or historical.

In contrast, the Strasbourg thaler appears to have a more direct political message. The mica overlays contained in the box are painted to turn the gentleman painted on vellum into a select number of European leaders. These are distinct not only in their outfits but in the inscriptions on the mica, which name the countries of which they are leaders or important figures in the original language. Two of the micas have less obvious identities. It has been assumed that mica 'D' is Queen Christina of Sweden given the long hair and the facial features that the mica adds, however at the point this set is assumed to have been created she had abdicated the throne and was in exile. Mica 'H' is also unclear, though considering visual comparisons with outfits worn by other European Leaders in this period, two possibilities are Dutch Statesman Johann de Witt and Charles X Gustav of Sweden (Christina's successor).

There is no clear connection between these European leaders other than the fact that many of them were Catholic or closely connected with the Catholic Church. This *shraubtaler* is unique (as far as the author has been able to trace) and there is no other set like it from which a connection between the rulers can be discerned. Unlike the known portraits paired with mica talcs of Charles II and Henrietta Maria, and Christina of Sweden, this work does not appear to have a narrative function, but instead be a who's-who of European monarchs and leaders in the 1650s. The idea that this could be an educational tool is further supported by the fact that the inscriptions are in each leader's own language. Whoever this was produced by or for would have been able to learn who was in charge in Europe in this particular moment, and to do so in a covert manner, having the 'facts' hidden within the thaler in which the portrait and micas are housed. One thing that is clear is that this was painted by a citizen of the Holy Roman Empire, which explains the title 'Impera' for the figure who appears to be Leopold I.

As for the authorship of these *schraubtalers*, they both of their portraits have a similar appearance, however their saturation is more likely a result of the manner through which they have been concealed over the centuries, meaning that the watercolour used has not faded. Thalers could have travelled across Europe in this period so it is possible that they were created in the same studio. The only named artist in relation to works like this is Abraham Remshard (Remshart), whose portraits and painted scenes have a similar quality to the two portraits here. This is especially the case in the colourful backgrounds of the two portraits. It is more likely, however, that these portraits were simply painted in the style known to artists for producing *schraubtalers*.

[1] <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/object/Portret-van-een-vijftigjarige-vrouw--d057d7a5fc107f38513c22eb0e9e5a7b>.