THE LIMNER COMPANY



GERMAN SCHOOL (17th century)

A 'schraubtaler' which unscrews to reveal a portrait of Ferdinand Maria (Elector of Bavaria from 1651) wearing ermine collar and an ermine-lined crimson crown, and eight mica overlays, each representing a different European leaders*

Circa: circa 1653

circa 1660

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[ia]’.

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

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

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 in the Holy Roman and Habsburg Empires from the sixteenth to the nineteenth 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 sixteenth century. In the present example, the portrait is 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 schraubtaleren 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 eighteenth century.

In contrast to many of these objects, whose sitters cannot be identified and whose purpose appears to be to 'dress up' the portrait painted with the set, the Strasbourg thaler appears to have a more direct political message. The mica overlays contained in the box are painted to turn Ferdinand Maria, 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, including Ferdinand Maria, the focal leader of the set. This portrait is likely to have been painted in circa 1660, following the restoration of Charles II to the crown, which explains the English King's inclusion in the set. Bavaria was an electorate of the Holy Roman Empire, which also explains the title 'Impera' given to Leopold I. A large portion of Ferdinand Maria's time as Elector was spent repairing the wounds caused by the Thirty Years' War. He also built the Theatine Church and Nymphenburg Palace in Munich, and the architectural styles of both buildings were heavily influenced by the Italian Baroque, introduced to Ferdinand by his wife, Princess Henriette Adelaide of Savoy (1636-1676).

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 is instead a who's-who of European monarchs and leaders in the 1650s, created for a subject of the Holy Roman Empire to study. 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.

The only named artist in relation to works like this thaler 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 portraits. It is more likely, however, that the portrait was simply painted in the style known to artists for producing schraubtalers.