THE LIMNER COMPANY



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: circa 1650

circa 1650

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

Circular, 40mm (1 5/8in) 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 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, 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. It is likely that this 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 this thaler in the wider tradition of seventeenth-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.

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.

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