

Robert-Joseph Auguste, Silversmith—and Sculptor?

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THE ACQUISITION of two terracotta groups by the Metropolitan Museum in 1993 raises some intriguing questions as to the role played by eighteenth-century Parisian silversmiths in the creation of silver sculpture.

Each group is composed of two children seated amid piles of game or vegetables and crustacea.¹ In one (Figures 1, 2) they are tussling on a mound of dead birds and game: one child grabs at a bird held in the other's arm, and that child pulls the other's hair. In the second group (Figure 3) two children lounge on a bed of asparagus, lettuce, celery, and mushrooms from which emerge a lobster and a crayfish. One child clasps a large bunch of artichoke stalks, the other holds a cluster of leafy stems in the folds of his drapery. Each composition is set on a lightly ridged, rocky base resting on a smooth plinth. Clearly en suite, the groups are different only in the shape of their bases: the first is oval, the second circular. This circumstance, taken together with the specific and highly detailed modeling of comestibles, led to the thought that they must have been models for the covers of silver tureens.

By the middle of the eighteenth century a complete table service would include tureens in two shapes, both used for ragouts: an oval one, the tureen, and a circular one, the *pot à oille*, which owes its name to a stew of Spanish origin (*olla podrida*) that might include "toutes sortes de bon gibier et autres viandes, comme faisans, perdrix, cailles, beccassés, beccassines, ortolans, pigeons, becfigues et autres, que l'on y met en entier."² Our round terracotta indicates that the *pot à oille* also came to be used for vegetables and seafood, as it was at a dinner given by Louis XV at Choisy in 1747.³

By great good fortune we are able to match our groups with existing silver objects. The same compositions—there are only minor variations⁴—appear on the covers of a tureen and *pot à oille*, respectively, first

made by Robert-Joseph Auguste (1723–?1805, master 1757) in Paris 1756–58 (Figures 4–9). They have been in the Danish Royal Collection since 1769, when they were delivered to Christian VII (1749–1808) along with two other tureens just completed by Auguste to match the earlier ones.⁵

Christian VII spent three months in Paris in the autumn of 1768; no record survives of any contact between him and Auguste. The least devious explanation for the appearance of the ensembles in Copenhagen the next year is that the Danish king visited Auguste's atelier, saw the tureens, liked them, and commissioned two more.

In 1756 sculptural groups were a common decorative feature of tureens. They were placed on the table as part of a formal pattern, the so-called *service à la française*; thus considerable attention was paid to their design, by both silversmith and diner. Naturalistically modeled assemblages of fish, game, and vegetables, intended to convey the contents of the tureen, appear in Parisian silver about 1730, the earliest example apparently being a tureen of 1729–30 in the Detroit Institute of Arts.⁶ Attributed to Thomas Germain (1673–1748, master 1720), its cover is strewn with game birds and vegetables (Figure 10). The cover of another tureen, made by Germain in 1733–34, is piled with a gastronomic mélange of lobster, hare, artichoke and other vegetables; and a year later Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier (1675–1750) designed two tureens for Evelyn Pierrepont, 1st duke of Kingston, each crowned with a luxuriant display of vegetables and crustacea (Figure 11).

Figural subjects of the type represented by the Museum's new groups became current in the mid-1750s and are found in tureens dating between 1756 and 1758 by Robert-Joseph Auguste and Thomas Germain's son, François-Thomas (1726–1791, master 1748). That these silversmiths were not relying on a common outside source is clear from distinct differences in repertoire and modeling style. The question is whether each was his own sculptor. Because Auguste awaits his archivist and biographer, a firm answer can-

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Figures 1, 2. *Children with Dead Game*. Model attributed to Robert-Joseph Auguste (1723–?1805). Terracotta, H. 15.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Gift of The Hearst Foundation, by exchange, Gifts in memory of Frederick P. Victoria, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Volunteer Anniversary Gift, and Ralph and Frances DeJur Foundation Inc. Gift, 1993, 1993.334.1





Figure 3. *Children with Vegetables and Shellfish*. Model attributed to Robert-Joseph Auguste. Terracotta, H. 17.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Gift of The Hearst Foundation, by exchange, Gifts in memory of Frederick P. Victoria, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Volunteer Anniversary Gift, and Ralph and Frances DeJur Foundation Inc. Gift, 1993, 1993.334.2

not be given, but by taking into account what little we do know of his life, and of the younger Germain's career and working methods, which have recently been thoroughly investigated,⁷ we may arrive at some tentative conclusions.

Auguste did not come from a family of silversmiths. His father, Christophe, was described in 1758 as "bourgeois de Paris," and it is not known how Robert-Joseph came to enter the profession or from whom he learned it. However, he was already experienced by the time he obtained his mastership in 1757. He had not served the customary apprenticeship but had

spent ten years working for different *orfèvres*—presumably as a *compagnon* or journeyman—and is said to have been employed in working on objects for the king.⁸ On August 26, 1755, Madame de Pompadour had purchased from the *marchand mercier* Lazare Duvaux "Deux figures en or sur des terrasses, composés à l'usage de salière & poivrière, l'une représentant un Hollandois qui présente une huître, l'autre un paysan qui tient un sac."⁹ As was usual at the time no artist was named; but in 1777 when the figures were sold from the collection of Pierre Randon de Boisset (1708–1776), they were catalogued as being "de bon



Figure 4. Tureen and stand. Silver; tureen H. 35.3 cm, stand L. 77 cm. Maker: Robert-Joseph Auguste, Paris, 1756–57. Copenhagen, The Danish Royal Silver Room (photo: Kit Weiss)

goût & de la plus parfaite exécution par M. Auguste.”¹⁰ As Auguste was then at the height of his career this attribution can probably be trusted, and, assuming this to be so, the figures (which are not known to exist today) were made two years before he became a member of the guild; thus we need not be surprised to find such an accomplished grasp of figures as those in the Danish tureens that mark Auguste’s official debut as a silversmith.¹¹

Curiously, over the next ten years, Auguste produced very little work, and apparently no silver except for two ladles of 1758–59 that now accompany the Danish tureens.¹² This may have been due in part to financial entanglements; in 1760 he was being held responsible for the debts of the jeweler Claude-Dominique Rondé (act. 1724–after 1757), for whom he stood surety.¹³ This episode is perhaps a clue to his career at the time, as Auguste was then described as a *marchand joaillier*, and it was during this period that he executed five gold snuffboxes, an unusual undertaking for a silversmith specializing in tablewares. One, in the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 12) is dated 1766–67; the others range in date from 1760–61 to 1769–71.¹⁴

From about 1770 to 1785 there is an uninterrupted record of steady production encompassing a wide range of objects: single pieces, services, crown jewels for the coronation of Louis XVI,¹⁵ mounted vases,¹⁶ even the engraving of plaques identifying the coffins

of royal princesses.¹⁷ No work later than 1787 appears to be known, and Auguste is last recorded in 1795 when he was living in the rue des Orties; his unconfirmed death date has been given as 1805.¹⁸

There are only a few scattered indications of the size and organization of Auguste’s workshop. Sometime before 1773 he took on Louis-Emmanuel Gabriel (master 1773) as an apprentice or journeyman,¹⁹ and in 1782 a chaser, Georges Boetger, reported the burglary of his room in Auguste’s premises.²⁰ The silversmith Jean Rameau (master 1771–ca. 1779) was recorded as being “associated with” Auguste from 1779 to 1789 in the place du Carrousel (where he had moved in 1784).²¹

These few references point to a workshop not unlike that of Auguste’s colleague, François-Thomas Germain, if not so extravagant in scale. The careers of the two men were very similar. Both were goldsmiths to the king; both worked extensively for foreign courts, Auguste succeeding to commissions after 1765 when Germain declared bankruptcy. Both men produced gold boxes, mounted vases, and worked in gilt bronze.²² For this they required not only the regular assistance of apprentices and journeymen but also that of specialist artists and craftsmen, among them, chasers, polishers, engravers, and modelers.

In 1757, at the height of his activity, Germain was said to have employed 120 workmen; 80 were counted in 1764.²³ Some of his work was executed by silver-



Figure 5. *Pot à huile* and stand. Silver; tureen H. 43.2 cm, stand L. 72.3 cm. Maker: Robert-Joseph Auguste, Paris, 1756–58. Copenhagen, The Danish Royal Silver Room (photo: Kit Weiss)

Figures 6, 7. Detail of cover in Figure 4 (photo: Kit Weiss)



Figures 8, 9. Detail of cover in Figure 4 (photo: Kit Weiss)





Figure 10. Tureen and stand. Silver; stand L. 56.5 cm. Maker: Thomas Germain (1673–1748), Paris, 1733–34. The Detroit Institute of Arts



Figure 11. Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier (1671–1750). Design for two tureens for the duke of Kingston, 1735. Folio 72 from his *Oeuvre*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1918, 18.62.5(71)



Figure 12. Snuffbox. Gold, L. 7 cm. Maker: Robert-Joseph Auguste, Paris, 1766–67. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Handy and Harman, 1965, 65.255

smiths working independently,²⁴ and there is evidence to indicate that he had recourse to the talents of some contemporary sculptors. He is presumed to have had a working relationship with both Augustin Pajou (1730–1809) and J. B. C. Dhuez (1729–1793), as indicated by debts owed them in 1762 and 1778, respectively.²⁵ And in the Salon of 1761 Étienne-Maurice Falconet (1716–1791) exhibited plaster models of a pair of candelabra that was executed in silver by Germain—the only uncontested instance of Falconet’s foray into silver sculpture.²⁶ Auguste’s connections with other contemporaneous sculptors are more indirect. Jean-Pierre-Antoine Tassaert (1727–1788) declared himself familiar with Auguste’s financial affairs in 1760, perhaps indicative of a professional association,²⁷ and it has apparently been suggested that bas-relief plaques set in the tureens of a service made by Auguste in 1775–76 are the work of Pajou.²⁸ Madame de Pompadour’s gold salt and pepper figures, which had been said in 1777 to be the work of Auguste, were sold in 1786 as Falconet models,²⁹ an attribution that has been carried into the twentieth century but without confirmation; indeed the very type of figure, to judge from the description, is quite outside Falconet’s usual repertoire. That his name should appear in this context is not surprising, however, as he was certainly one of the most popular sculptors of the mid-eighteenth century—in part through the models he designed for the Sèvres manufactory while director of the sculpture studio from 1757 to 1766.

Germain himself possessed a large collection of sculptures, models, drawings, and prints, many inherited from his father, who is seen with some of his own models in terracotta, plaster, and wax in the portrait of him and his wife by Nicolas de Largillierre (1656–1746) (Figure 13). In the atelier of Germain *fils* were seven boxes of lead models of fruit, vegetables, and game, and—in a medals cabinet—nearly six hundred small bas-reliefs in silver, copper, and lead. In his “cabinet de sculpture” were hundreds of designs for silver as well as sculptures by Falconet, Louis Félix de la Rue, Edme Bouchardon, François Girardon, and others.³⁰ None of the sculptures can be shown to have been copied exactly by the younger Germain in silver, but his biographer has plausibly associated several pieces with the type of work being produced at Sèvres in the 1750s.³¹ The collection was clearly intended as source material, as a starting point for his own designs and for the models that were created in his own workshop.³² In an autobiographical statement written in 1766,³³ Germain declared he had begun his studies as a pupil of Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne (1704–1778): that

he became *orfèvre sculpteur du roi* implies some practical experience as a sculptor.

Auguste, too, was an *orfèvre sculpteur* and, like Germain, provided both designs and models for the silver that bears his mark. Several designs have been attributed to him in recent years, most of them having formed part of the inventory of his son, the silversmith Henry Auguste (1759–1816, master 1785), which was acquired by the Odier firm in 1810.³⁴ Unsigned, their style is closer to the severe Neoclassicism of Henry than the more graceful one of his father, but there is good reason to attribute to Robert-Joseph one design, that of a tureen closely matching a *pot à oille* executed by Auguste in 1778–81 for George III of England.³⁵ Atop the cover in the drawing (Figure 14) a seated hound paws over dead game in a composition reminiscent of the Danish tureens.³⁶

The degree of Auguste's participation in the preliminary stages of his work is not easily decided: consistency of style between the Danish tureens of 1756 and the drawing in Figure 11 does not require the same hand, only the same artistic authority. Our terracottas could be the work of a modeler in Auguste's atelier, an independent sculptor of the reputation of Falconet, or one of the many serviceable members of



Figure 14. Design for a tureen. Attributed to Robert-Joseph Auguste. Brush, ink, and wash. Paris, École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts

the Académie de Saint-Luc. But it is equally possible that they are by Auguste himself, and in the absence of contrary evidence we may consider that they represent Auguste as designer and sculptor as well as silversmith.

For the time being we may take up the lead offered in a letter written by Charles-Nicolas Cochin in 1765 to the marquis de Marigny: "Il ne paraît maintenant de distingué dans cet art [l'orfèvrerie] que de M. Auguste, tous les autres étant plutôt des marchands qui présentent sous leur nom les ouvrages de bons ouvriers que des gens capable d'exécuter eux-mêmes."³⁷



Figure 13. Nicolas de Largillierre (1656–1746). *Thomas Germain and His Wife*, 1736. Oil on canvas. Lisbon, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

NOTES

1. Formerly in the collection of Paul Wallraf, London; sale, Sotheby Parke Bernet London, Dec. 8, 1983, lot 302.

2. Henry Havard, *Dictionnaire de l'ameublement et de la décoration*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1887–90) III, col. 1140, quoting from the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, 1704.

3. Marie-France Noël-Waldteufel, "Manger à la cour: alimentation et gastronomie aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles," *Versailles et les tables royales en Europe*, Musée National des châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon (Nov. 3, 1993–Feb. 27, 1994) p. 74.

4. The leather strap of the game bag stretched across the thigh of the child with the bird has been omitted from the silver version, and the bag itself is shaped and patterned somewhat differently.

5. *La Table d'un Roi*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs (Paris, Nov. 18, 1987–Jan. 31, 1988) p. 84.

6. Christiane Perrin, *François-Thomas Germain orfèvre des rois* (Saint-Rémy-en-l'Eau, 1993) p. 139.
7. Ibid., passim.
8. Henry Nocq, *Le Poinçon de Paris*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1926–31) I, p. 31.
9. Louis Courajod, ed., *Le Livre-Journal de Lazare Duvaux* (Paris, 1873) II, no. 2225.
10. Cited by Ronald Freyberger, "The Randon de Boisset Sale, 1777: Decorative Arts," *Apollo* 111 (April 1980) lot 252, p. 298.
11. It is possible that Auguste was also author of another work sold by Lazare Duvaux to Madame de Pompadour two years earlier, on Aug. 22, 1753: "Un groupe en or de deux enfans sur une terrasse ornée de coquillages & plantes de mer, portant une grande coquille couverte à deux charnières, à l'usage de salière & poivrière" (Courajod, *Livre-Journal*, no. 1495).
12. *La Table d'un Roi*, cat. nos. 78, 79. They are not en suite stylistically with the tureens and may have accompanied them more or less by chance.
13. "L'art tarifé au XVIIIe siècle," *Nouvelles Archives de l'Art Français*, 3rd series, IV (1888) pp. 268–269.
14. Hermitage, St. Petersburg, 1760–61; Louvre, 1762–63; Earl Spencer, Althorp, 1767–68; Victoria and Albert Museum, 1769–71 (Serge Grandjean, *Catalogue des tabatières boîtes et étuis des XVIIIe et XIXe siècles du musée du Louvre* [Paris, 1981] pp. 34–35).
15. Alphonse Maze-Sencier, *Le Livre des collectionneurs* (Paris, 1885) I, p. 69.
16. A pair of bloodstone vases on gilt-bronze pedestals, signed and dated Auguste F. Orfèvre du Roi à Paris 1775, were lot 129 at Sotheby's, London, May 18, 1967; the sale of the collection of Blondel de Gagny in 1776 included a large vase of porphyry mounted in copper gilt by Auguste (Courajod, *Livre-Journal*, 1873, I, p. ccxxxvi).
17. Maze-Sencier, *Le Livre des collectionneurs*, p. 70.
18. Ulrich Thieme and Felix Becker, *Allgemeines Lexicon der Bildenden Künstler* (Leipzig, 1908) II, p. 249.
19. Nocq, *Le Poinçon de Paris*, II (1927) p. 201.
20. Ibid., p. 31.
21. Ibid., III (1928) pp. 105, 383.
22. Perrin, *François-Thomas Germain*, pp. 50, 220ff.
23. Ibid., p. 41.
24. Ibid., pp. 43, 44.
25. Ibid., p. 49.
26. Ibid., pp. 196–197. Described as "Deux Groupes de femmes en plâtre. Ce sont des Chandeliers pour être exécutés en argent." Germain's name is not mentioned, but the groups were recognized at the time as elements of a table centerpiece he was preparing.
27. *Nouvelles Archives*, pp. 258–269.
28. *Les Grands Orfèvres de Louis XIII à Charles X* (Paris, 1965) p. 236, where the attribution is said to be that of Andreas Lindblom.
29. Courajod, *Livre-Journal*, I, p. lxxiv.
30. Perrin, *François-Thomas Germain*, p. 60.
31. E.g., Germain's gilt-silver salts for the Portuguese court, 1757–60, modeled as infant American Indians, quite similar to a Vincennes model in production 1754 (ibid., p. 172; Tamara Préaud and Antoine d'Albis, *La Porcelaine de Vincennes* [Paris, 1991] cat. no. 199).
32. The intertwined professions of silversmith and sculptor have recently been discussed by Yves Carlier ("Sculpture et orfèvrerie à Paris au XVIIIe siècle: Jacques et Jacques-Nicolas Roettiers," *Revue de l'art*, 105 [1994] pp. 61–69). In his view, the signature "Fait par F.T. Germain Sculpr Orfre du Roy . . ." signifies only that Germain was the owner—perhaps copyright holder, in modern terms—of a model, not necessarily its author (p. 61, and personal correspondence).
33. *Mémoire à consulter et consultation pour le Sr François Thomas Germain* (Perrin, *François-Thomas Germain*, passim).
34. Sotheby Parke Bernet, Monaco, Nov. 26, 1979, lots 610–613.
35. Yves Carlier, "Le service d'orfèvrerie de George III d'Angleterre." Versailles et les tables royales en Europe, exh. cat. (Versailles, Nov. 3, 1993–Feb. 27, 1994) pp. 330–332.
36. It was perhaps just this kind of design to which Catherine II of Russia was referring when she wrote to Baron Grimm on Oct. 16, 1780: "Il faut que je vous dise j'ai vu ce matin les dessins de M. Auguste et que ces dessins sont précisément comme je n'en veux pas: ils sont chargés de figures d'animaux et de figures humaines et d'ornements comme l'on en voit partout, et tout cela ensemble fait que j'ai ordonné de les renvoyer. Outre cela, M. Auguste est d'une cherté épouvantable; je crois qu'il prendra pour la façon autant qu'il y aura de poids; je lui tire ma révérence" (Louis Réau, *Correspondance artistique de Grimm avec Catherine II*, *Archives de l'art français*, xvii, 1932, p. 89).
37. July 6, 1765, quoted in Perrin, *François-Thomas Germain*, p. 43.