Migration and Metamorphosis: The Transformation of Shapes, Ornaments, and Materials

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The realm of the decorative arts is so vast and varied that collectors and amateurs generally limit themselves to a single area. It is unusual for a porcelain collector, for example, to have an equal interest in glass, goldsmithing, enamel work, or textiles. Connoisseurship in a number of fields is not expected even of experts; to work most effectively in his field, the art historian tends to concentrate on a specific medium. Occasionally, however, an object presents such obvious borrowings that one needs to consider their original effect in other materials. I would like to illustrate this with a few examples.

The nineteenth-century lavabo garniture by the silversmith François-Désiré Froment-Meurice (Figure 1), acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in 1999,1 occasions particular interest because it stands out, with its clear lines and restrained decoration, from the bulk of Froment-Meurice’s oeuvre. With their serene shapes and uniform surface ornament, a trellis and flower-head pattern, this ewer and basin avoid the excess often seen on objects from this period. The handle, full of energy despite its gentle curves, provides a welcome contrasting element.

The latticework or grid pattern of the present set recalls the surface of cut glass,2 but its two-color gilding suggests the painted ornamentation of a porcelain set. This grid pattern, enclosing circles and rounded forms, can be found in designs developed much earlier. A comparable version appears on the floor and ceiling of the tomb chapel of Diane de Poitiers (d. 1506).3 More than a century later, in 1696, Nicodemus Tessin the Younger, from the workshop of Jean Berain, had a series of drawings sent to Stockholm, among them a design for a state coach for Charles XI of Sweden that presents a similar pattern in a cartouche (Figure 2).4 The translation of this ornament into metalwork is not the only historicist element; the shape of the ewer itself has a very long tradition.5

To find precedents for the shape, we need look no further than the many washbasin sets produced in varied ceramic materials, especially those in porcelain, whose sinuous lines and relative heft are echoed, in vermeil, in Figure 1. The potbellied swelling above the tight constriction between the foot and body of the vessel and the elongated, spindle-shaped neck ultimately derive from water jugs common in the Ottoman world. The shape had been familiar to Western craftsmen for centuries. In Italy, especially, it had long been part of the traditional canon of vessel types and was used in the eighteenth century in the design of coffeepots to the virtual exclusion of all other shapes. Carl Hermarck points out this, without speculating further about the shape’s derivation.6 Yet one need only recall how important the Arab influence once was in southern Italy—Frederick II did what he could to attract Arab scholars to his court in Apulia—to recognize that such strong cultural connections would have left their traces on the decorative arts (Figure 3). In Froment-Meurice’s time there was, in addition to this tradition, a further impetus behind the adoption of foreign shapes. This was the period’s fascination with the exotic, especially the customs and distinctive styles of North African and Near Eastern peoples. Thus the ewer and basin reflect not only contemporary objects in porcelain and glass but the original metal shape from Islamic art.

The Near East was also the source of a variety of candlestick widespread, in a number of shapes, in central Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This was the bell-footed type, whose conical drum or bell shape probably goes back to Syrian designs in metal as represented in opulently damascened examples in many collections.7 The West came to know this candlestick shape through its close contact with the Near East following the Crusades, but the Chinese were inspired by it as well. As an example, one might cite a lampstand with a polygonal foot made of porcelain and decorated in underglaze blue produced in the Xuande era of the Ming period (1426–35),8 an object that was appa-
Figure 1. François-Désiré Froment-Meurice (French, 1802–1855). Ewer and basin, Paris, ca. 1850. Silver gilt, ewer H. 15 in. (38.1 cm), basin L. 18% in. (47.6 cm), W. 13% in. (34.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Friends of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts Gifts, 1999 (1999.271.1,2)


Figure 3. Wine jug from altar cruets, Naples, 1798. Silver, H. 5¼ in. (13.7 cm). Private collection, Hamburg
sartly not made for export to Asia Minor but remained in China.

The European version is much simpler and more sparing in its use of material than the Near Eastern original, but the design of the foot clearly distinguishes it, in its heft and massiveness, from the traditional medieval candlestick: a shallow saucer with a pricket in the center to support the candle. The number and rich variety of examples of this utensil introduced to Europe show how eagerly its craftsmen expanded their modest repertoire of shapes with inspiration from abroad. This occurred during the High and late Middle Ages, when demand for quality furnishings increased throughout the Continent.

In Italian Renaissance bronze work, a type of table candlestick was developed that also adopts the Islamic pattern, presumably by way of late-medieval design. In it the proportions are varied in a wholly new way, and the surface is exploited for the pictorial and ornamental conventions of the time. An example is the pair probably made in Florence about 1520. The material is light bell metal, and the quality of the casting is excellent. The decoration, ornamental friezes and a parade of grotesque sea creatures in horizontal rows, is distinguished by its sharp edges and considerable subtlety, endowing the piece with the sculptural presence and animation typical of Italian bronze objects of the period (Figure 4).

In the seventeenth century the same form took on a new importance in north-central Europe, specifically Friesland and Schleswig-Holstein. Here we find massive bell-footed candlesticks, either round or polygonal, plain or decorated with relief friezes and sculptural ornaments like angel’s heads. These represent a flowering of brass casting in the Baroque era that was supported by a wealthy bourgeois culture. At the time they were made, they were luxury articles; their weight alone gave them considerable value. It must be noted that the evolution of this type of candlestick in the north was a late and independent regional development, one not seen in southern Germany, for example. Within a short time, utensil shapes and their decoration would begin to become standardized as court centers increasingly dominated artistic production.

After this stage in its evolution, the candlestick was further developed into a design that was quite uniform from Augsburg to Hamburg. In the late Baroque period there was a revival of both flat and bell-shaped styles; the saucer-footed version now had a pronounced upward curve at the edge. A pair of silver candlesticks with gadrooning friezes by Peter Klüver of Hamburg (Figure 5) are clearly still recognizable variants of the Islamic pattern but also prefigure, with their baluster shaft and socket, the candlestick type that would reign unchallenged through the entire Régence generation. The clear layering of the individual components, evident in the bell-footed type, is preserved in the Régence model. This venerable tradi-

Figure 4. Candlestick, one of a pair, Florence, ca. 1520. Bell metal, H. 7½ in. (18.5 cm). Private collection, Hamburg

Figure 5. Peter Klüver. Pair of candlesticks, Hamburg, 1690–1700. Silver, H. 5⅞ in. (14 cm). Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg (1999.5a,b)
tion came to an end only when the Rococo, with its wealth of curving forms, created an entirely new style.

One isolated instance of the playful translation of a shape from one material to another is a piece of Nuremberg metalwork, the small cup (Figure 6) by the master Andreas Bergmann (1651–1688). It illustrates excellently how difficult it is to capture a vessel’s character in a material different from the one in which it was first developed. Bergmann was attempting to execute in precious metal a Venetian winged glass. Glassblowers had no difficulty forming the foot, shaft, and cup into an organic whole, but the metalworker was forced to shape each part separately, transferring the ornamental forms of the High Baroque onto an earlier vessel type. The foot is a flat Baroque floral design. The shaft, formed as a conical spiral, could obviously not be twisted in a single step, as the craftsman in glass was able to do. The complicated intertwining wing ornaments of the original are replaced in the silver vessel by grotesque ornaments of the sort familiar, in countless variations, as the brackets applied to stems of cups. These were precast elements available in every Nuremberg workshop. The metalworker chose not to try to imitate in metal the airy tangle of glass rods, yet the appearance of the original is suggested. For the cup, finally, the metalworker reverted to his standard repertoire of shapes and ornaments, producing a tumbler with Baroque flowers in repoussé covering the entire surface up to the lip, which is left plain. Such charming inventiveness is unusual, and comparable
pieces are extremely rare. I have included the cup as testimony to the Baroque metalworker’s imaginative approach and love of experimentation.

One of the most interesting adaptations of glass decoration in metal is the small double chalice from the Pfreimd Treasure, produced in the late sixteenth century (Figure 7). The two interlocking chalices are patterned after a widespread type of stem glass. The feet and cups are covered with a regular overall design by no means typical of metalwork. Even on silver pieces it is most uncommon. It imitates a type of glass ornamentation developed in Venice: thin threads of milk glass are laid down in a mold—one layer of parallel threads running perpendicular to another to produce a grid or reticello pattern—then clear glass is blown on top and bonds with them. Ideally, each of the resulting small cells contains a tiny air bubble that enhances the delicacy of the decoration. A covered beaker in the Metropolitan Museum illustrates the technique superbly (Figure 8).
Unlike the glassblower, the metalworker can decorate only the surface of his work. In this instance he engraved the grid pattern with sharp-edged lines and then approximated the air bubbles with tiny circular indentations. The delicate, transparent network of the glass is replicated as a delightful pattern of light reflections on the gilt surface. Something altogether new and different has been created in the process of imitation.

Another ornament adopted from glass—a peacock-feather pattern that is most uncommon in metalwork—decorates two silver beakers by the Hamburg metalworker Johann Adolf Lambrecht. One is in the armory of the Kremlin in Moscow,10 the other in a private collection (Figure 9). A dense pattern of smooth-edged, stippled lozenges circles each cup. At the top of each of them a tear-shaped indentation has been produced with a punch, and the whole is enlivened with the partial gilding. What at first appears to be a whimsical variant of the common snakeskin beaker is in fact the appropriation of a glass decoration apparently developed in the area of present-day Belgium but also discovered on a small Bohemian goblet with red-and-white rosettes from the Strasser Collection (Figure 10).11 The red glass dots of the original appear in the metal as punches. The design is extremely rare, even in glass, and was probably derived from a textile pattern. Its use on the Lambrecht beakers is a distinct rarity and is almost certain to have been requested by his patron. The reproduction of the glass beaker goes so far in its details that even the band of molding on which it stands is faithfully reinterpreted in silver.

Another accurate reproduction of a vessel is a still-unpublished Königsberg silver tankard from 1700 (private collection, Hamburg), a precise copy of a southern German barrel-stave tankard; even the laborious fitting of the wooden lid from the original is painstakingly reproduced in the metal. It belongs in the same category as the common double beakers made in the form of wooden casks. The interest of Königsberg goldsmiths in such barrel-stave objects is documented in another example, a coffeepot made in 1770 by Christian Vogel; the curiosity of this object is the combination of the correctly copied vessel with the compulsory spout of a coffeepot.12

One type of glass allowed its imitators greater formal freedom and inventiveness and is found throughout Germany’s seventeenth-century metalworking centers. Examples from Nuremberg and Aachen are perfectly representative of the type. The glass is the so-called Römer, a chalice-shaped cup atop a thick, often conical, trunklike base (Figure 11). The metal surfaces that took the place of transparent glass lent themselves to all manner of designs and patterns.

It was not only a desire for innovative decoration that led to the migration of shapes and designs from one material to another. One thinks of the early years of the eighteenth century, when porcelain was rediscovered in
Europe and seized upon as a new medium. The shapes and designs that were not prefigured in the porcelains of the Far East needed to be developed. These were not snatched out of thin air but, rather, borrowed from what already existed. Since the process has been discussed in adequate detail in recent literature, I confine myself to a few examples. One is a tureen by Johann II Pepfenhauser, of Augsburg, from 1731–33 (Figure 12). This design in silver was imitated in both porcelain and faience before porcelain artists created designs that were more appropriate to the medium.

A comparison of the silver tureen and the Meissen transformation (Figure 13) reveals the very different effects produced by metal and ceramic versions of the same shape. While the silver version has an elastic tension, a vitality enhanced by the light reflections, the same vessel in porcelain, with its straight lines and sharp divisions, projects a serene calm. It is much easier to imagine warm, nourishing soup in the Meissen tureen than in the cold, austere silver vessel from Augsburg. The imitation in Thuringian faience is of interest because of the delicacy with which it reproduces the silver shape. Compared with the first two tureens, with their voluminous presence, the faience version seems like a fragile, whimsical centerpiece.

Its impressive appearance made the Pepfenhauser tureen particularly important for ceramists; the vessel is perhaps the most notable example of silversmithing from Augsburg’s Régence. Like many of the city’s works in silver, it radiates an almost lifelike physicality and seems perfect in itself. Its harmony of shape and decoration, the latter somewhat restrained for all its richness, invited attempts to translate it into porcelain and other ceramic media. Its importance as a pattern piece was surely enhanced by its curving shape, which reflects the period’s fascination with chinoiserie.

A pair of porcelain tureens from Vienna’s Du Paquier period, whose shapes are obviously borrowed from a metalwork piece, illustrate an entirely different phenomenon (Figure 14). The basic shape is that of the so-called Spanish soup tureen, represented in many collections by Swiss examples (Figure 15). The vessel type, generally massive and heavy, was widespread about 1600. The Meissen porcelain works were still producing it, in the same dimensions, in the first half of the eighteenth century. Yet the Du Paquier version, while true to the traditional shape, is characterized by a lightness and delicacy that belie the weight of the original. The delicate panels of Régence ornament reflect the taste of a period that valued the human scale in all forms of artistic expression, that avoided unnecessary ostentation and oppressive heaviness, and that prized finesse and grace. The two tureens may represent the translation of a metalwork shape into porcelain; their reduced dimensions alone give them a different character. Other Du Paquier porcelains in the Metropolitan Museum borrow directly from silver shapes. Particular examples are a pair of candlesticks in the Régence style and a round bowl with grotesque handles that are almost precisely prefigured in a Hamburg brandy cup made in 1675 by one of the leading masters of the city, Leonhardt Rothaer I.
A decorative pattern that has been used to strikingly different effect in various materials over the ages is the basket weave, seen in two canisters made by the Berlin master Godet about 1810 (Figure 16). They take the form of woven baskets, and the lids with acorn handles suggest flat disks of bamboo. This translation of simple basket weave into lavishly chiseled silver vessels is remarkable in two respects, though the pattern, familiar from repeated variations between 1800 and 1830 in ivory, tortoiseshell, and woodcarving, was a standard component of the formal repertoire of the time. In these cake canisters it is significantly enhanced by the silver cord or twine that encircles it, a common motif especially in Renaissance silver. The regular verticals and horizontals of the weaving are set off in their static calm by the faceted reflections on the cords. Unknowledgeable viewers tend to believe these pieces, created in the Neoclassical style, to be late Art Nouveau or even Art Deco works. This adds an additional, delightful dimension of uncertainty to the already intended charm of imitating the look of one material in another. In choosing to render one medium in another, the artist has robbed his work of a clear tie to a specific style, surely an unintended feature, but one that adds to its appeal.
Here the basket weave is rendered as a tight, closed surface, but loose weaves in pierced patterns are common in metalwork. A silver basket by the Berlin artist Christian Lieberkühn the Younger, which was auctioned in London in June 2001, is a superb example. Yet the ornament seen in the Berlin canisters derives from earlier work. Erasmus Hornick, long active in Nuremberg, repeatedly used the ornament before 1600. For example, a ewer and basin from his drawings and engravings are entirely covered with a basket weave like that of the canisters (Figure 17).\(^1^7\)

The earliest example I know of is funereal in nature. It is the marble sarcophagus, of 1464, of Niccolò and Fioreta Martelli, linked to the name of Donatello, in the Cappella Martelli of San Lorenzo in Florence. The sarcophagus takes the form of a monumental oval basket and, with the exception of the lid, represents a realistic copy of such an object. As Charles Avery mentions, there are precedents for it in antiquity.\(^1^8\)

About 1500 the pattern appears on a drawing by Giovanni Antonio da Brescia after Mantegna (Figure 18).\(^1^9\) It reproduces the design for a fountain crowned by a figure of Neptune enthroned on a vase-shaped vessel, which appears to be formed of wickerwork. The design, intended either for execution in bronze or as a detail study for a painting, was possibly inspired by bottles cushioned in a protective covering of woven raffia or cane (like that long used for bottles of Chianti). The vase that serves as a throne can also be interpreted as a basket of the type employed to trap lobsters and crabs, a reference to the sea god.

A surprising use of the basket-weave motif is found on a putto sculpted by Hans Daucher about 1525–26 to decorate a balustrade in the Fugger Chapel at the church of Saint Anna in Augsburg.\(^2^0\) The boy wears stockings or little boots with open toes in a basket-weave pattern. The unusual costume detail, along with the pose and other attributes characterizing the putto as an "Ercoletto," or little Hercules, is so striking that visitors to the church always remark on it. Here the pattern was used on a much larger scale than it could ever have been in actual basketry or another material, and it is perceived in a different way.

Examples from metalwork are numerous. Even a work by Giulio Romano (1499–1546) can be mentioned here: a drawing after him shows a basket
wherein two infants emerge from eggshells while playing with a swan. The object represents the birth of Castor and Pollux, sons of Leda, who was seduced by Jupiter in the guise of a swan. Wenzel Jamnitzer used basketwork simply as a decorative element on a knob under the basin of his Merckelsche centerpiece, executed about 1548–59. A silver bowl as a basket was made between 1670 and 1675 by the Augsburg goldsmith Samuel Schneeweiss. A more spectacular basketwork invention is a writing box, the exterior of which, executed as wickerwork, takes the shape of a Victorian-looking pavilion. The horror vacui that overlpowers the object rather than only adorning it is not found in another example, the spherical knob of a salver’s, preserved as a drawing in Stockholm.

Basketry is not a demanding craft. On the contrary, it is achieved with the simplest and least spectacular of techniques, traditionally producing unassuming objects of a practical nature. Yet the basket-weave pattern presents an image of clarity and order quite unlike the exquisite complexity of intertwining ironwork, for example. However, the simple pattern takes on a refinement in the Berlin canisters, as the reflections from the hundreds of separate facets emphasize the containers’ shape and volume and give them a festive appearance.

After studying a few such examples of the migration and metamorphosis of forms and ornaments through the ages and from one material to another, the eye becomes attuned to their constant occurrence. They attest to the freedom of imagination with which artists and craftsmen create as they borrow from one another.

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NOTES
2. See Walter Spiegel, Glas des Historismus, Kunst- und Gebrauchsägler des 19. Jahrhunderts (Braunschweig, 1980), fig. 92; see also the drawings of shapes in Ehrenfelder Glas des Historismus, ed. Werner Schäcke (Cologne, 1979), pp. 126, 130, and passim.
5. For the ewer shape in porcelain, see Chef-d’œuvre de la porcelaine de Limoges, exh. cat. (Paris, 1996), no. 100 (Boire Renaissance).
10. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 181, ill. vol. 2, no. 73.
15. See Heitmann et al., Goldschmiede Hamburgs, vol. 1, ill. p. 35.
17. For the ewer, see John Eyward, "The Drawings and Engraved Ornament of Erasmus Hornick," The Burlington Magazine 110 (July 1968), no. 784, fig. 29. See also C. G. Boerner, Neue Lagerliste 55 (Düsseldorf, 1970), no. 31.
25. Ibid., ill. p. 477.