

## The Construction of Some Empire Silver

CLARE LE CORBEILLER

*Associate Curator, Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

THE CONVENTIONAL WAY of attaching separate decorative elements to the body of a piece of silver is by soldering. In France, until the early nineteenth century, this generally amounted to little more than the application of handles, feet or foot rims, hinges of covers, and the like, as surface decoration was achieved by chasing, casting, and/or engraving. After about 1802, under the influence of the designers Charles Percier and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine, Napoleon's arbiters of taste, a new style began to dominate French silver. From an integrated design comprising an interplay of techniques, the object became essentially a blank surface on which the repertory of Empire decoration—masks, swans, palmettes, classical figures—was to be displayed. In the work of Napoleon's principal goldsmith, Martin-Guillaume Biennais, these motifs were applied in the traditional manner, by soldering.

It was Biennais's contemporary, Jean-Baptiste-Claude Odiot (1763–1850), who introduced a method of construction which, though noted by previous writers, has been passed over without amplification. The method is illustrated here by two items from a 219-piece table service sold by Odiot in 1817 to Count Nikolai Demidoff (the service has been widely dispersed since it was first sold at auction in 1928). The cruet (Figure 1) is one of a pair, the large serving dish (Figure 3), one of four. Once disassembled, they show that Odiot pierced the main body of each piece with holes at the points of attachment (Figures 2 and 4), and provided the individual elements with threaded bolts (Figure 5), which were secured to the body by nuts. Each part to be applied, and its corresponding position on the main body, was coded.<sup>1</sup>

The method of bolting had some precedent in silversmithing—notably in the drinking cups modeled as stags or other animals popular in Germany in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—but had more recently been practiced by bronze workers, particularly those supplying furniture mounts.<sup>2</sup> Odiot was clearly familiar with bronze techniques, and may have become so through his occasional collaboration with the bronze founder Pierre-Philippe Thomire (1751–1843). Together they produced an elaborate suite of furniture for the *toilette* of Marie-Louise in 1810 (destroyed by her order in 1832 on the pretext of raising money for hospitals during the cholera epidemic of that year) and, the following year, the cradle for the King of Rome. About 1827 Odiot presented the Musée des Arts Modernes du Luxembourg with bronze models of thirty of his silver pieces, including this cruet frame.<sup>3</sup> It was, indeed, quite probably his association with Thomire that prompted Odiot to adopt such a

1. On the cruet frame Odiot employed a combination of punched circles and scratched lines (not, apparently, intended as Roman numerals). The kneeling figures of the serving dish are coded with the numerals III and IV. Two other dishes of the set of four are numbered V and VI, and VII and VIII respectively; the fourth, which should be numbered I and II, is not coded.

2. E.g., the mounts on a black lacquer secrétaire in the Metropolitan Museum (20.155.11), made by J.-H. Riesener in 1783 for Marie-Antoinette. In England, Matthew Boulton assembled his mounted vases in the same way, marking his sections sometimes with punched dots, sometimes with Roman numerals (Nicholas Goodison, *Ormolu: The Work of Matthew Boulton* [London, 1974] pp. 67–68).

3. Now in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris. The model for the cruet frame is inscribed L'ORIGINAL EN ARGENT EN 1810.

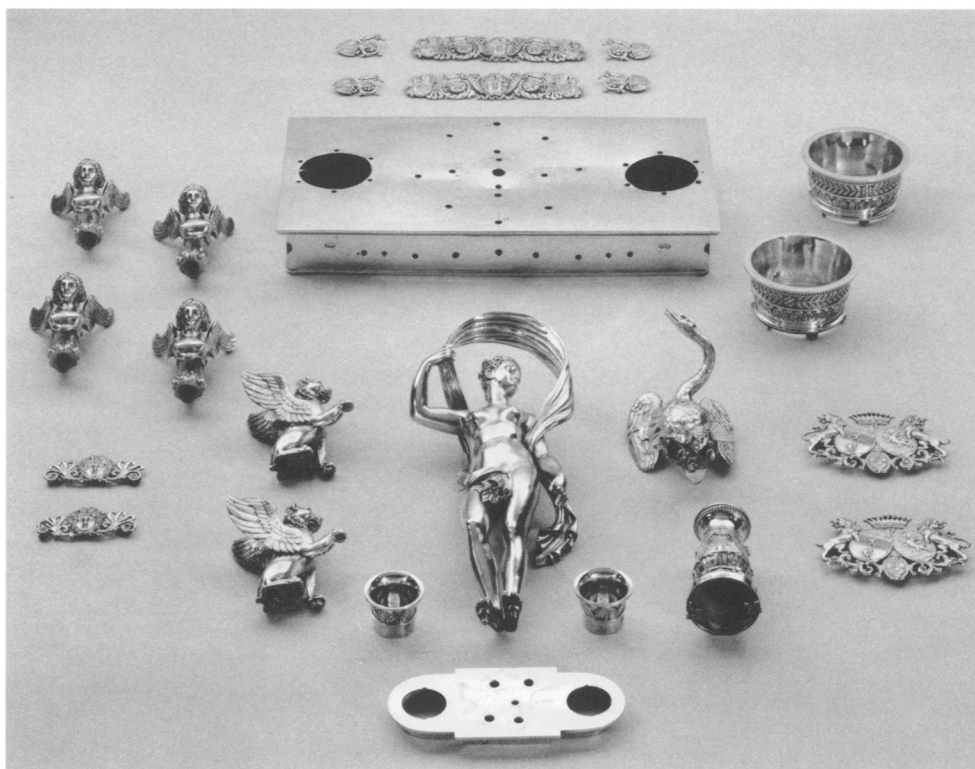


1. Jean-Baptiste-Claude Odier (1763–1850), Cruet, Paris, ca. 1817. Silver, H. 15  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (39.1 cm.), L. 12 in. (30.5 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Audrey Love, in memory of C. Ruxton Love, Jr., 1978.524.la-g

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3. Odier, Serving dish (*coupe*), Paris, ca. 1817. Silver, H. 15  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (39.4 cm.). Formerly lent to The Metropolitan Museum of Art by the Audrey Love Foundation, L. 1978.8.28

2. The cruet disassembled





5. Supporting figure from serving dish,  
showing attachment bolts



4. The serving dish  
disassembled



method of construction for some of his larger sculptural pieces. It was an efficient method, suited both to the nature of current design and the character of Odiot's business. He was a prolific goldsmith whose work was in fashionable demand, and the practice would certainly have facilitated the production of his numerous table services with their repeated models and motifs, which could be readily assembled by any shop assistant.

In spite of its practicality, the method of assembly by bolting does not appear to have gained much currency in France or elsewhere, although it was employed between 1830 and 1835 by Jacques-Henri Fauconnier, formerly Odiot's *chef d'atelier*, for a monumental vase commissioned for presentation to the marquis de Lafayette.<sup>4</sup> It recurs much later, however, in the Demidoff service: when the pieces were recently disassembled, it was discovered that the unidentified armorial plaques (see Figures 2 and 4), which are affixed in the same manner as the other applied elements, were made in London in 1863 by the firm C. F. Hancock. Although there are no export or import marks on the service to indicate it was ever out of France, it does nevertheless seem likely to have been in England at the time that the plaques were made and attached. Otherwise their placement and exact duplication of Odiot's techniques would hardly have been feasible.<sup>5</sup>

4. Sotheby Parke Bernet, New York, June 6, 1980. Kindly brought to my attention by David Cohen.

5. At least some English provenance is implied in the sale catalogue (Anderson Galleries, New York, Dec. 15, 1928), where the service is said to have been acquired by the grandfather of the vendor, "an anonymous English gentleman of title."