**French Silver**

title: Notes to Reader I

subtitle: Stamps and Marks

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short\_title: Notes to Reader I

## Parisian Goldsmiths

The works catalogued in this publication were made of silver by Parisian artisans called *orfèvres*. The word *orfèvre* (meaning silversmith as well as goldsmith) derives from the Old French root words *or* (gold) and *fevre* (smith). The regulations of the Parisian guild (*les corps des marchands orfèvres-joailliers de la ville de Paris*) that governed the goldsmith’s craft from before 1260 until 1791/97 permitted those who achieved master status to work with the precious metals of gold and silver and to use processes that combined these metals, as in gilding silver.[[1]](#endnote-1) Accordingly, the terms *orfèvre* and goldsmith are used throughout this catalogue though all the objects are of silver or gilded silver.

## Quality Control

During the early modern period, silver bullion was rarely 100 percent pure because the prevailing refinement processes for silver ore did not remove all impurities or traces of other elements. Moreover, for certain silversmithing tasks, non-precious metals, usually copper, were added to molten silver to achieve an alloy that, once cooled into its solid state, could satisfactorily sustain the stresses of being raised and shaped from sheet plate; at a higher purity, the alloy would have been softer to shape but easily deformed. In order to regulate the standard of silver as a precious metal alloy and to ensure the quality of production in France, King Henri II set the legal standard in 1549 for works in silver at 958 parts per thousand, or 95.8 percent pure silver, with a tolerance or deviation of plus or minus two grains allowance, called *les grains de remède* (equal to 6.94 parts per thousand in one marc of silver).[[2]](#endnote-2) The communal *corps des marchands orfèvres-joailliers* were responsible for maintaining this legal standard among members in its jurisdiction. Thus, guild wardens tested, or assayed, each work at an early point in its creation to determine its compliance before the artisan invested more time in its execution.[[3]](#endnote-3) A mark of the guild (*le poinçon de la maison commune*,which in Paris was known as *le poinçon de jurande*) guaranteed the piece met the legal standard. The form of this mark changed each year upon the annual election of the assay master. The sequential marks drew from an alphabetic cycle of capital letters in consecutive order (excluding “J,” “U,” and “W”). In common parlance, these marks are called “date letters,” for each letter corresponds, generally, to a period of twelve months, more or less. As the Parisian guild was preeminent within the realm, its sequences of date letters were always surmounted by a crown.

## Five Marks of Guarantee: Maker’s, Charge, Warden’s, Discharge, and Countermarks

Until 1672 Parisian works in precious metal were struck with two marks of guarantee. First, the goldsmith struck component parts of each work, early in its creation, with his own distinctive and unique registered mark incorporating his initials and a personal device (called the *poinçon de maître*) before taking it to the guildhall (*la maison commune*) in the rue des Orfèvres to be assayed. If the silver alloy matched the legal standard, the guild warden added a mark (the aforementioned *poinçon de la maison commune* or *poinçon de jurande*) to the component parts of the piece, which then could return to the artisan’s workshop to be “fashioned” and finished.

In 1672 the French crown declared a permanent tax on works of precious metal, levied according to the weight of the finished piece. Until 1774 the collection of this tax was farmed out to agents, known as *fermiers*,who were granted the right to collect the levy (*droit de marc*) on behalf of the crown. Their responsibilities altered and complicated the marking stages on works of precious metal. The new system required the goldsmith, after striking his mark on his provisional work, to go first to the *bureau des fermiers* (often located in the guildhall) to register his intention, or promise, to return when the piece was finished. At this stage, the crown’s agent struck the work with a so-called charge mark (*poinçon de charge*). For large works, this mark always took the form of a crowned letter corresponding to that assigned to the local royal mint (“A” was the letter of the Paris mint), though its font and shape were altered with each new fermier*.* Then, the piece could be assayed at the guildhall and marked by the guild’s warden or representative.

Having successfully fulfilled these preliminary steps, the goldsmith could continue making, or fashioning, the piece. When finished, the goldsmith returned as promised to the fermier for the weighing session and payment of the duty tax. The piece was then struck with a fourth stamp, the discharge mark (*poinçon de décharge*), which allowed it to be freely sold or rented. The discharge marks varied in motif and size in order to minimize any disfiguration to the finished piece. Subsequent events could bring an object back to the fermier for an additional tax and the application of another discharge mark to indicate an export, import, return to the retail market, or sale after bankruptcy.

A fifth class of marks, countermarks (*contremarques*), was used when a new fermier inspected an artisan’s stock to confirm the goldsmith had paid the necessary tax and that the pieces had been properly marked by the preceding fermier.[[4]](#endnote-4)

## The Significance of Period Marks

Authentic marks on French silver of the *ancien régime* can identify the maker, the city of origin, and the year(s) of creation. Their presence provides important and essential information about an object’s history, especially when considered in association with any engraved armorials and incised signatures, inscriptions of weight, or inventory numbers on the piece. Even when marks have been inconsistently, imperfectly, or partially struck, they are nonetheless key indicators of historic events that enrich our understanding. The marks on the objects in this catalogue were scrutinized afresh in advance of publication. The resulting visual images and written descriptions are provided for those readers who wish to learn more.

## Technical Summary

Technical and scientific analysis, undertaken by conservators at the J. Paul Getty Museum, informs our empirical knowledge of each object in this catalogue, from fabrication to current state of condition. These investigations continue as analytical methods evolve and refine our interpretation of data. Updated reports will be published periodically on the art collection pages of the Getty Museum website (https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/). One object, the complex Franco-Anglo water fountain ([**cat. no. 1**](#_top)), is accompanied here, however, with an exemplary technical summary compiled by Jessica Chasen (formerly Assistant Conservator, Decorative Arts and Sculpture Conservation, at the J. Paul Getty Museum and presently Associate Conservator, Objects Conservation, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art).

1. In 1723 the Parisian guild, or corporation, of goldsmiths, jewelers, and enamelers appointed the goldsmith Pierre Le Roy to codify and clarify the accumulated statutes and laws governing their craft and retail trade. The first edition of the revised regulations was printed in 1734 as *Statuts et privileges du corps des marchands orfèvres-joyailliers de la ville de Paris* (Statutes and Privileges of the Corporation of Merchant Goldsmiths-Jewelers of the City of Paris). Twenty-five years later in 1759, a second edition was printed and became the definitive version. A facsimile of this rare publication was published in 2003 ({{Le Roy 1759/2003}}). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. {{Perrin 1993}}, 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Before the Revolution, the assay test usually involved scraping a sample of metal from the silver piece, weighing the scrap, melting it down in a quantity of lead, boiling off the alloys, and weighing the remaining solid silver mass. {{Hoopes 1954}}, 7–8; {{Dennis 1960}}, vol. 2, 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The best compendium of *ancien régime* silver marks is {{Bimbenet-Privat and Fontaines 1995}}. The portable volume by Louis Carré contains later marks as well ({{Carré 1990}}). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)