**French Silver**

title: Notes to Reader II

subtitle: Historic Units of Measure and Currency

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bio: Charissa Bremer-David is an object-based art historian specializing in early modern European decorative arts. She has worked with the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum for many years, serving as curator of sculpture and decorative arts from 2008 to her retirement in 2020. She curated several exhibitions, notably *Woven Gold, Tapestries of Louis XIV* (2015) and *Paris: Life and Luxury in the Eighteenth Century* (2011) and edited their accompanying catalogues and has published extensively on French tapestries. Her research interests span material culture, East-West trade, provenance, the development of the trans-Atlantic art market and the birth of American art museums at the turn of the twentieth century.

short\_title: Notes to Reader II

## I. Silver Weights 1600s–1700s, with Conversion to Metric[[1]](#endnote-1)

**France**[[2]](#endnote-2)

1 livre = 2 marcs = 489.506 grams

1 marc = 8 onces = 244.753 grams

1 once = 8 gros = 30.594 grams

1 gros = 3 deniers = 3.824 grams

1 denier = 24 grains = 1.275 grams

1 grain = 0.053 grams

**Electorates and Principalities of the Holy Roman Empire (Cologne Standard)**[[3]](#endnote-3)

1 Pfund = 2 Marks = 467.710 grams

1 Mark = 8 Unzen = 233.855 grams

1 Unze = 2 Loth = 29.232 grams

1 Lot = 4 Quentchen = 14.616 grams

1 Quentchen = 4 Pfennige = 3.654 grams

1 Pfennig = 1/16 Lot = 0.914 grams

1 Gran = 1/18 Lot = 0.812 grams

**England/United Kingdom of Great Britain (Troy Weight)**[[4]](#endnote-4)

1 pound = 12 ounces (ozt.) = 373.242 grams

1 ounce = 20 pennyweights (dwt.) = 31.104 grams

1 pennyweight = 24 grains (gr.) = 1.555 grams

1 grain = 0.065 grams

**French Silver Weights Converted to Troy Ounces and to Metric**

1 livre = 15 ozt. 14 dwt. 18.240 gr. = 489.506 grams

1 marc = 7 ozt. 17 dwt. 9.116 gr. = 244.753 grams

1 once = 19 dwt. 16.137 gr. = 30.594 grams

1 gros = 2 dwt. 11.013 gr. = 3.824 grams

1 denier = 19.676 gr. = 1.275 grams

1 grain = 0.818 gr. = 0.053 grams

The subject of silver is vast and multidisciplinary. References are provided on the natural element of silver; the historic processes of mining the metal above- and underground; artisanal/indigenous knowledge, the alchemy/science, technologies, and (generally exploitative) labor involved in its metallurgical extraction and refining from alloys and ores; the market demands and trade routes that brought supplies of bullion around the globe; and its minting into coin and the early modern economies powered by it.[[5]](#endnote-5)

## II. Coinage and Currencies 1600s–1700s

**France**

1 marc du louis d’or = 24 livres tournois in 1726

1 écu d’argent = 6 livres tournois in 1726

1 livre tournois = 20 sols/sous

1 sol/sou = 12 deniers

1 denier

These monetary values were fixed until 1790. During this period, the cost of living increased in France while wages lagged in pace. A salaried skilled worker, such as an elite cabinetmaker (*ébéniste*), earned about 400 livres in the year 1726 compared to about 750 livres per year toward the end of the century.[[6]](#endnote-6) A few facts pertaining to the goldsmiths’ profession provide a relative sense of monetary values for the period: the sponsor’s security fee (*caution*) to support an applicant’s entry as master (*maître*) into the Parisian guild of goldsmiths (*les corps des marchands orfèvres-joailliers de la ville de Paris*) was 1,000 livres;[[7]](#endnote-7) the value in Paris for the weight unit of one silver marc(244.753 grams) fluctuated between 52 livres and 52 livres, 10 sous, from 1752 to 1765;[[8]](#endnote-8) and a book of plate and vessel designs in the latest fashion cost 24 livres in 1748.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Select Regions of the Holy Roman Empire[[10]](#endnote-10)

**Duchy of Mecklenburg-Schwerin**[[11]](#endnote-11)

1 Reichs Thaler/Taler = 90 Schillinge

1 Reichs Thaler/Taler = 24 Groschen

1 Groschen = 12 Pfennige

1Pfennig

**Electorate-Principality of Hanover**[[12]](#endnote-12)

1 Reichs Thaler/Taler = 36 Groschen

1 Groschen = 8 Pfennige

1 Pfennig

**England**

1 guinea (gold) = 1 pound sterling silver + 1 shilling or 21 shillings (though the value fluctuated)[[13]](#endnote-13)

1 pound (note) = 20 shillings[[14]](#endnote-14)

1 crown = 5 shillings

1 shilling = 12 pence

1 penny

1. Silver bullion weight, when measured in grams, is typically factored to the third decimal point and rounded up or down. Michèle Bimbenet-Privat, Conservateur général au département des Objets d’art, Musée du Louvre, observed that, generally, French *ancien régime* weight measurements for silver plate did not achieve the same degree of precision as the modern era. Communication from Michèle Bimbenet-Privat of March 6, 2021. On the relevance of scratch weights, or historic weights scratched into antique silver plate, see {{Burstyn 2005}}. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. {{Perrin 1993}}, 23; {{Bimbenet-Privat and Fontaines 1995}}, front matter, unpaginated. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Weight units for silver varied regionally and temporally across the Holy Roman Empire. The Cologne Mark is given here for its relevancy to [**cat. nos. 8**](#_top) and [**10**](#_top). Equivalent to approximately 234 grams, the Mark in the northern duchy of Mecklenburg-Schwerin aligned with that of Cologne (see [**cat. no. 8**](#_top)). Information courtesy of Torsten Fried, Leiter de Münzkabinett, Staatliche Schlösser, Gärten und Kunstsammlungen Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. While the two girandoles, the subject of [**cat. no. 10**](#_top), were made by the Parisian goldsmith Robert Joseph Auguste for the Hanoverian court, silver weight in the correspondence from the London-based patron was given in Cologne Marks. In Hanover, however, the historical unit of one Markvaried from 230.032 to 231.287 grams. Regionally, the silver content in the alloy was lower in Hanover and in the north of the empire (at 12 Lot with a purity of 750 parts per thousand, or 75 percent) than in Cologne and in the south (at 13 Lot with a purity of 812.5 parts per thousand, or 82.25 percent). See {{Witthöft 1979}}, 73; {{Stein 1997}}, 576–77; {{Seelig 2002}}, 106; and {{Seelig 2012}}, 76n3, 77. Ulrike Weinhold, Curator, Grünes Gewölbe, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, and independent art historian Ines Elsner, Berlin, kindly clarified regional variations of bullion weight measures within the Holy Roman Empire; Ulrike Weinhold and Ines Elsner, email message to author, April 8, 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. One troy pound consists of twelve troy ounces (ozt.). James Rothwell, Decorative Arts Curator, National Trust of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, noted that, in historic lists of English/British silver plate, silver bullion weights were rarely recorded down to the grain level. Typically, the pennyweight (dwt.) was rounded up or down accordingly. James Rothwell, email message to author, January 4, 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The following sources summarize the essential literature from diverse fields of research: {{ Borges et al. 2018 }}; {{Amussen and Long 2020}}; and {{Bigelow 2020}}, especially pp. 1–19, “Introduction: The Meaning of Metals.” {{Sgard 1982}}, 425–26. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. {{Dennis 1960}}, vol. 2, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The price of one marcof silver bullion increased from 52 livres in December 1751 to 52 livres, 10 sous by May 1765. Paris, Archives nationales de France, Minutier central, LXXXIII, 511, May 22, 1765, “Délivrance de mobilier par François Thomas Germain, sculpteur orfèvre du roi,” under the subsection titled “Prem.er avril 1765. No.7. Bordereau et résultat des matières d’orphèvreries remises par Mr. Germain le [p.er](http://p.er/) avril 1765 à la commandite avec le prix des matières et l’apréciation des façons à payer aud.t Sr. Germain.”Images of the document were kindly shared by Peter Fuhring. See {{Solodkoff 2000}}, 131–32 (citing a document dated December 15, 1751), and {{Seelig 2012}}, 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The important two-part 1748 publication of *Éléments d’orfèvrerie divisés en deux parties de cinquante feuilles chacune compose par Pierre Germain, marchand orfevre joaillier* by Pierre Germain cost 12 livres per division, each with fifty sheets of designs. See {{Germain 1748}} and {{Bapst 1887}}, 183n4. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Currencies varied regionally and temporally across the Holy Roman Empire. The Convention of Vienna in September 1753, however, set a standard that was widely adopted, though not in Mecklenburg-Schwerin nor in Hanover (see [**notes 11**](#_top) and [**12**](#_top) below). See {{Shaw 1896}}, 374–75, and {{Koeppe 2010}}, 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. From 1752 to 1756, the coinage of Mecklenburg-Schwerin and its sister duchy of Mecklenburg-Strelitz aligned with the system prevailing in the neighboring duchy of Brandenburg and in the kingdom of Prussia. These years coincided with the commission of a silver centerpiece, known as *la machine d’argent*, by Christian Ludwig II, duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin ([**cat. nos. 8**](#_top)). See {{Kunzel 1994}}, 158–59; Robert Selig, “Eighteenth-Century Currencies,” *The Brigade Dispatch: Journal of the Brigade of the American Revolution* XLIII, no. 3 (Autumn 2013): 16–32, especially 29n12; and {{Shaw 1896}}, 379. As a point of reference, the medalist Johann Peter Nonheim, who worked for Christian Ludwig II from 1753 to 1755, earned an annual salary of 300 Thalers. See {{Fried 2019}}, especially107n77. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The electorate-principality of Hanover aligned with the system used in the duchy of Brunswick-Lüneburg. See {{Shaw 1896}}, 373, and {{Michael 2016}}. The two girandoles ([**cat. no. 10**](#_top)), were made by the Parisian goldsmith Robert Joseph Auguste for the Hanoverian court. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The gold sovereign coin minted from the Tudors to James I was equal in value to 20 shillings or one pound sterling silver. Its descendent, the so-called guinea gold coin, was valued in 1717 at 21 shillings, though this rate fluctuated higher. In 1817 a new sovereign coin was introduced equal to 20 shillings or one pound. See “The History of the Gold Sovereign,” The Royal Mint: The Original Maker, accessed July 8, 2020, <https://www.royalmint.com/discover/sovereigns/history-of-the-gold-sovereign/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. The Bank of England began printing pound notes in the late 1600s, with values derived from the Latin terms of *libra*, *solidus*, *denarius* (for pound, shilling, penny/pence). See “Early Bank Notes,” Bank of England Museum, updated March 4, 2022, https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/museum/online-collections/banknotes/early-banknotes. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)