

Exclusive tin

After having discussed the matter of the tin mounting of this coconut tankard in the abstract, a possible itinerary of the coconut as raw material entering Switzerland shall be mapped in the following. Furthermore, the entrance of the tankard to the Bernisches Historisches Museum shall be given a closer look. Both is done under the assumption that the tankard was made in Switzerland. Considering the plain style of the tankard it seems very likely that it really was made by a Swiss silver- or tinsmith, since Dora Fanny Rittmeyer describes the appeal of the simple as typical for Swiss or Southern German silversmith's art of the time the tankard is believed to be made in.¹ Telling whether the coconut tankard was made in Bern on the other hand remains rather difficult.

Already during the Middle Ages coconuts were brought to Europe through trading routes from Asia and Africa. For a coconut finding its way to Switzerland the most likely way for it to travel would have been over Venice where Arabian traders from Alexandria sold their goods to the merchants of the city. Through the trading of the Venetian merchants the coconuts reached the Northern parts of Europe including countries situated around the Alps like Switzerland. Coconuts were regarded as a very precious and special good but still not traded as individual items. The widespread appearance of coconut objects in not inconsiderable numbers in Europe suggests the trade of a certain amount of coconuts at a regular base. Moreover, there are noticeable parallels between countries strongly involved in trading, like Portugal and England, and the amount of objects made of coconuts that can be found in these countries. Once brought to Europe the coconuts were processed into goblets, cups and reliquaries by European silversmiths. During the second half of the 16th century the import of coconuts from South and Middle America contributed to the spreading of coconuts and therefore of objects made from them in Europe. Thereby, a broader mass of owners of coconut objects and a greater variety of coconut objects started to exist. In Germany, which I mention because of its ties to Switzerland in regards of silversmith's art, the use of coconuts in their work became popular among silversmiths especially from the 16th century on. During the 16th and 17th centuries coconut vessels were very popular to have as part of a cabinet of curiosities as well.² From the 16th century on drinking vessels as

¹ Dora Fanny Rittmeyer, *Geschichte der Luzerner Silber- und Goldschmiedekunst von den Anfängen bis zur*

² Rolf Fritz, *Die Gefässe aus Kokosnuss in Mitteleuropa. 1250-1800*, (Mainz a. Rh.: Zabern 1983), 8-33.

presents of honour were traditionally given to senior civil servants, revees and people of similar status in Switzerland. This tradition further promoted the production of special drinking vessels in general and probably also that of the ones including coconuts.³ The coconut processed in the tin tankard discussed here can in conclusion be considered to have entered Switzerland through these networks of trade answering to the market's growing demand for this specific material.

The import of coconuts to Europe as food followed as late as in the 18th century. Even if the problem of conservation might have played an important role in this regard it is still worth giving this fact a thought, namely in terms of the change of value. In their countries of origin coconuts were used as nutrition and their shell as common drinking cups, but as soon as they entered Europe the shells of the coconuts were enhanced through mountings in precious materials such as gold or silver and regarded as very special.⁴ Discussing the coconut tankard at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva I have pointed out the ambiguity that lies in such a mounting of the coconut. Nevertheless, the material is given new meaning and value on the way of its travels. The integration of the coconut in a different material culture, in this case the one of Switzerland, challenges its identity as everyday object and reassesses it as precious, special object. The tin mounting makes it part of the widespread use and popularity of tankards mounted in tin in 17th century Switzerland but in its foreign materiality the coconut remains special among the traditional Swiss cavities of tankards.

The entrance of the coconut tankard into the museum as Swiss tin object will finally be outlined here. The coconut tankard was bought by the Bernisches Historisches Museum in 1906, as already mentioned in the abstract. Unfortunately there is no other information conveyed to us today but the fact that the museum actively decided to buy the object can at least bring some light into the dark. As Rittmeyer states, there was little interest in tin and silver ware in Switzerland during the 19th century and therefore a lot of objects made of silver and tin were sold to buyers abroad.⁵ Considering this fact the decision of the

³ Dora Fanny Rittmeyer, *Geschichte der Luzerner Silber- und Goldschmiedekunst von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Luzern: Keller, 1941), 215f.

⁴ Rolf Fritz, *Die Gefässe aus Kokosnuss in Mitteleuropa. 1250-1800*, (Mainz a. Rh.: Zabern 1983), 17.

⁵ Dora Fanny Rittmeyer, *Geschichte der Luzerner Silber- und Goldschmiedekunst von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Luzern: Keller, 1941), 214.

Bernisches Historisches Museum can be understood as an act to preserve at least some of the Swiss objects made of tin that were still left at the beginning of the 20th century. This argumentation would as well support the assumption that the coconut tankard was originally made in Switzerland.

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