

Recensión de / Book review of: Stratford, Neil: *La Coupe de sainte Agnès (France — Espagne — Angleterre)*. Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 2022, 174 pp., 126 ills. [ISBN: 978-2-87754-681-2].

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At the British Museum in London, the unique and precious character of the “Coupe de sainte Agnès”, also known as the “Royal Gold Cup”, is emphasized by its presentation as a lone piece to be viewed but never to be touched. However, before ending up at the museum, the cup changed many hands, as is detailed by Neil Stratford in his slim yet lavishly illustrated volume. Stratford —Keeper Emeritus of Medieval and Later Antiquities at the British Museum— begins by briefly discussing the features of the cup (chapter 1), guiding the reader with many illustrations as well as a list of inscriptions. In particular the drawing detailing its current physical structure is insightful, as it shows the cup’s construction and additions from the Tudor period.

The subsequent chapter (2) explores the artefact’s astonishing movements through France, Spain, and England, beginning his narrative with the *coupe*’s arrival in Paris in 1883. There it was sold to Baron Jérôme-Frédéric Pichon by Dom Simon de Campo, who had brought the goldsmith work from the convent of the Poor Clares at Medina de Pomar (near Burgos). The convent lacked financial means and tried to remedy this through the sale of some of its goods. This chapter is the most exciting part of the book, as it shows not only the itinerary of the *coupe*, but also how the object was perceived by the different parties that once held it. To the abbess of Medina de Pomar the golden item embodied money, whereas the bibliophile Pichon considered it a beautiful collectible (with a price tag). And as Stratford goes further back into history, we find out that in 1610 Juan Fernández de Velasco, fifth duke of Frías, donated the cup (*vaso de oro*, meant to be used for sacrament, p. 59) and other valuables to his ancestral monastery at Medina de Pomar because he wanted to be commemorated there. The stipulation was that the items were not to leave the monastery. So here, the goblet has become a liturgical artefact (and part of a larger assemblage) gifted with the expectation to receive a spiritual counter-gift. However, when Fernández de Velasco obtained the *coupe* in 1604 from King James I of England it served as a diplomatic gift, celebrating the successful peace negotiations between Spain and England. The cup’s English history is connected to the royal treasury, which explains the addition of the Tudor roses on the stem. In England, the *coupe*’s monetary value was recorded in relation to the costs of English’s battles in France. The preservation of the cup is therefore exceptional (p. 62). The object came into royal hands via John, Duke of Bedford (d. 1435), who acted as Prince Henry VI’s regent of France. How the duke got hold of it is unclear, although the historian and bibliophile Léopold Delisle suggested his French connection allowed him to buy it in France after the death of the French King Charles VI (p. 67). The goblet (French: *hanap*) is listed in Charles VI’s inventory, where it is described in detail as a gift from his uncle, Jean, Duke of Berry, in 1391. Stratford considers the present in light of diplomacy, although its mechanisms remain unclear (p. 65). After detailing this history, the author takes us back to England. By the end of 1891 Pichon had sold the *coupe* to the art dealer Samson Wertheimer, after which it was acquired by the British Museum and became a piece to be displayed and studied.

Stratford’s narration of the cup’s history —which was of great interest to Pichon and the keepers of the British Museum, too— showcases the collaboration of scholars, connoisseurs, and curators (keepers) in the late nineteenth century. Tracing the movements of the object reveals that at certain points in time the cup physically changed in appearance (e.g., knob and pearls are missing from the lid; Tudor roses were added to the stem, as well as an inscription). This is detailed in the very brief chapter 3, which especially when integrated into chapter 2, adds another exciting layer to the artefact’s itinerary.

After following the object’s history (chapters 2 and 3), this reviewer was eager to learn more about its earliest life at the French court. Chapter 4 turns instead to the author’s deep knowledge about goldsmithing and enamels, which comes to life in his analysis of the vessel’s manufacture through the splendid comparative material from Paris, where they were especially skilled in *opus punctile* (minuscule dots or points made in metalwork with a sharp instrument in order to create delicate patterns). When focusing on one artwork in

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particular, it is understandable that a material analysis is included so as to present the fullest picture possible. Yet it also demonstrates how challenging it can be to integrate this into the larger story.

The short chapters 5, 6, and 7 begin with a discussion of the representations of St Agnes, whose life and martyrdom are carried out in blue, red, white, and green enamelwork. She was an important saint at the Capetian and Valois courts. King Charles V was born on her feast day (21 January), and in the inventory drawn up after his death in 1380 no less than 30 objects with an image of Agnes appear, including “un hanap d’or, à couvescle esmaillé de la vie de sainte Agnès, pesant six marcs” (p. 64). While this cup cannot be identified with that now housed at the British Museum because the weight in the inventory does not match that of the actual cup, the prominence of Agnes has been taken as a cue that the *coupe* donated by the Duke of Berry to Charles VI had originally been intended as a gift to King Charles V, the duke’s brother, who was so devoted to the saint (p. 141). Notwithstanding the cup’s first identifiable appearance in the 1391 inventory made after the death of Charles VI, an exact date of manufacture and the name of an artist remain unknown, nor are there any references to its use.

In his final chapter (7) Stratford points out that the Christian iconographic program—which on the inside of the lid includes an image of Christ holding the chalice in which an eucharistic host is displayed—does not exclude a secular use of the cup, because in medieval thought, speech, and actions the secular and religious were intertwined. Indeed, the medieval sources provided by Stratford never qualify the *coupe* as a specifically liturgical object. Only at Medina de Pomar did it become a consecrated receptacle for the host. Whether used in a secular or religious context, the cup would have been part of an assemblage of vessels and would have interacted with them, an aspect easily overlooked when centring solely on the material artefact.

Stratford’s concise volume reminds its readers that just one artefact has many stories to tell. When combined, they deepen our understanding of how and why precious items were crafted, preserved (or got lost), and became highly desired collectibles.