

LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

KUNST



GERMAN SCHOOL, AROUND 1550

Design for an Elk Goblet and Cover

Body colour, watercolour, heightened with white and gold. On two attached sheets of paper, cut out in parts. A few smoothed contemporary folds. Watermarked: *Lion* [Nuremberg, c.1540-50].

Bearing an anonymous collector's mark: *A shield with a coat of arms (German eagle with a small shield)* on the finial. Collector's stamp of Peter Vischer (Lugt 2115) lower left on the mount; annotated in brown ink lower right: *No. 8.* (number deleted) / *No. 1. Hans Holbein.* 1008 x 242 mm

PROVENANCE: Probably a German princely collection, according to the small collector's mark: *shield with a coat of arms with a German eagle with a small shield*, on the finial of the goblet – Peter Vischer (1751-1823), Basle – Peter Vischer-Passavant (1779-1851), Basle – Private collection, Switzerland

The interest in naturalism which was current in the second half of the sixteenth century all over Europe was particularly strong at the court of Emperor Rudolf II in Prague. It often found expression in the creation of highly elaborate drinking vessels and other decorative goldsmiths' and silversmiths' work using natural objects such as coconuts, narwhal tusks and bezoar stones (found in the gut of the bezoar or wild goat). A great many of these pieces were commissioned by Rudolf II for his *Kunst- und Wunderkammer*. A court position was created for artists specializing in carving bone and horn.¹ Both elk foot and elk antler were also used in the making of drinking vessels, as is shown by two entries in the inventory of the Emperor's *Kunstammer*.² The present *Design for an Elk Goblet and Cover* is a fine example of the style of work produced. When surveying Emperor Rudolf's collection, one is struck by the range and quality of the art objects it contained, from painted representations of natural objects and specimens to lapidary and goldsmiths' work.³

This magnificent, richly coloured and highly decorative work represents an elk goblet. Its cover is surmounted by a figure of a huntsman with a musket. The presence of folds in the unusually large sheet suggests that it was at one time bound into an album of designs by different craftsmen whose work was commissioned by or intended for presentation to the owner of a princely *Kunstammer*. It is not possible to relate the sheet to any known commission as no documents have survived. However it provides historians and collectors with rare documentary evidence of a curious, no longer extant work of art. To date, the drawing is one of only very few surviving designs documenting this unusual subject.

The monarchs of Bavaria once owned a priceless goblet dating from circa 1600 which was kept in the celebrated *Schatzkammer* (treasury) of the Munich Residenz, but is now lost. Another example by Peter Wilhelm Polack (c.1664-1721)⁴ dating from the late seventeenth century [Fig. 1] is today housed in the Art Museum in Tallinn, Estonia. It formerly belonged to the Brotherhood of the Black Heads (*Mustpeade vennaskond*) in Reval (now Tallinn). The Burg Meersburg Museum on Lake Constance holds a rather odd example of an elk goblet which is probably datable to the nineteenth century [Fig. 2].

¹ *Prag um 1600. Kunst und Kultur am Hofe Rudolfs II*, exhib. cat., Villa Hügel, Essen 1988, pp. 468-9.

² Willibald Sauerländer et al., *Die Münchner Kunstammer*, Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, Abhandlungen - NF, H.129, Munich 2008, p. 142, no. 377.

³ Lee Hendrix, 'Natural History Illustration at the Court of Rudolf II', in *Rudolf II and Prague – The Court and the City*, exhib. cat., London 1997, pp. 157 ff.

⁴ Adolf Friedenthal, *Die Goldschmiede Revels*, no. 167, p. 89.

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This drawing was at one time in the collection of Peter Vischer (called Peter Vischer-Sarasin, 1751 - Basel - 1823), the leading collector active in Basel around 1800. He was renowned for his knowledge of German Renaissance art, especially works on paper. Vischer also owned several portraits by Hans Holbein. His son Peter Vischer-Passavent (1779 -Basel- 1851) continued collecting prints and drawings, including works by Dürer, Schongauer and Holbein as well as illuminated books of hours. After his death the collection was dispersed at auction in 1852.⁵

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Fig. 1: Peter Wilhelm Polack, *An Elk Goblet*, 1675-81, silver gilt, height: 71 cm.
Gift of Peter the Great. Formerly owned by the Brotherhood of the Black Heads. (Mustpeade vennaskond)
Reval (now Tallinn), Estonia



Fig 2: Unknown artist, *An Elk Goblet* (probably 19th century), beaker and base of wood.
Burg Meersburg Museum, Germany.

⁵ *Catalogue des livres d'heures, dessins et estampes formant le cabinet de feu M. Pierre Vischer de Bale – Rédigé par M. Ch. Le Blanc*, Paris, Hotel de Vente, salle 1, 1852, sale held in four parts from 19 April to 4 May 1852.