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# Koopman Rare Art

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Director's Choice – Timo Koopman  
The Silver Nef



## A Huge German 19th Century nef

Hanau, circa 1890

The goldsmith mark of Neresheimer & Co

The hull also hallmarked with import marks for London, 1911

*Length: 86cm, 33<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>in. Height: 120cm, 47<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>in. long*

*Weight: 13,850gr., 445<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>oz*

This week's Director's choice focuses on a wonderful table ornament that historically dates

back to the 13th century. The 19th century example illustrated above is modelled as a fantastical Armada galleon, with an eagle figurehead, the sides chased with scenes of nautical mythology and the deck with three towering masts. The vessel with numerous figures engaging in seafaring activities and the whole ship resting on four wheels.

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### **The Nef:**

The nef developed from the knar; a merchant ship used by the Vikings. It had a fixed mast and relied solely on sails. The tower-like structures called “castles” were borrowed from south-European shipbuilding traditions. In contrast to the cog (a later type of ship), the nef still had a steering oar on the starboard side rather than a rudder mounted on the stern.

Nefs were mainly to be found sailing between the Normandy coast of France and the Cinque Ports of south-east England. The latter was a confederation of coastal towns, principally Dover, Hastings, Hythe, Romney, and Sandwich. Nefs were used for transporting both goods and passengers; accounts of the Third Crusade in 1189 state that King Richard the Lionheart of England set out for Palestine with a fleet containing 33 nefes.

The French referred to these vessels as carracks.

### **The History of the Silver Nef:**

In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the nef was not only an extravagant table ornament but also a container made of precious metals in the shape of a ship. If not just used for decoration, it could hold salt or spices, cutlery and even napkins. The large nef depicted in the well-known calendar miniature for January from the Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry shows it is being used to hold, and perhaps wash, gilt dishes from the table service. (1)

Nefs are recorded in France as early as 1239, (2) initially consisting of just the hull, and perhaps used to drink from; by the 14th century the most elaborate had masts, sails and even crew, and had become too crowded with such detailing to be used as containers for anything. The so-called Mechanical Galleon in the British Museum is a late 16th-century German nef which is also a clock and automaton, with moving figures and music calendar miniature again for January from the Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry.



Detail from the mechanical clock



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*Page from the calendar of the Très Riches Heures showing the household of John, Duke of Berry exchanging New Year gifts. The Duke is seated at the right, in blue.*

These nefs were usually made of silver, silver-gilt or occasionally gold, often further embellished with enamel and jewels. A nautilus shell occasionally formed the hull of the ship, as with the Burghley Nef. Some even had wheels to allow them to be rolled from one end of the table to the other, but most had legs or pedestals. The nef was placed in front of the most important person at table as a mark of their status.

Interestingly, the equivalent in religious plate is the navicula, Latin for small ship, and a

term in English used for a boat-shaped incense-holder. (3)



Here we see the Burghley nef, a beautiful vessel made to hold salt, and it would have sat in front of the host at the table. The expression 'Right hand man' and 'Worth your salt' derive themselves from one's position at the table in relation to the salt cellar. Such was the value of salt at the Medieval table. All the display silver would then sit on the buffet display of plate in front of the table for the Lord and all his guest to admire.

Initially, nefes consisted of just the hull, perhaps to be used as drinking cups but they soon became too crowded to hold anything. By the 14th century we see much more detail being added, including sails, rigging and crew.

Some 19th century nef designs separated below the canon, opening up to reveal space in the hull which could hold wine and special condiments. This provided great amusement at

dinner parties or special occasions. With the high degree of ornamentation and design used to create Nefs, it's no surprise that they were such grand statements. Having wheels proved particularly useful at dinner parties as they could easily be moved around the table to serve guests.

Over time, the functional nef was replaced by the more imposing centrepiece. These were less practical as part of the dining experience and simply wonderful decoration to be admired. Nefs were expensive, and owning one was a clear sign of someone's social status. Placing it in front of the most important person at the table signified this and acted as a reminder of the host's financial or political status. They were exclusively used during elaborate meals such as banquets for Kings, Queens, Emperors and Dukes and the nef would be presented ceremoniously to the king to distinguish him from the other guests.

The greatest of the 19th century silversmiths to produce nefes was Neresheimer. They were based in Hanau and founded in 1890 as a partnership of August and Ludwig Neresheimer with Jean Schlingloff. Right from the start Neresheimer offered a wide range of highly decorative objects like nefes, tankards, coconut and nautilus cups, as well as other sumptuous sideboard pieces.



**An Enormous German 19th Century Nef**

Hanau circa 1890

Goldsmith's hallmark of Neresheimer & Co.

Imported into Chester 1909

Modelled as a fantastical ship with an infant Bacchus figurehead, the deck with three masts and figures engaged in battle while others enjoy a meal.

*Height: 114cm, 44  $\frac{3}{4}$  in*

*Weight: 9,761gr., 313  $\frac{3}{4}$  oz*



### **An Monumental 19th Century Parcel-Gilt Nef**

Hanau, circa 1890

Bearing the hallmarks of Berthold Hermann Muller and Georg Roth & Co for when it was imported into England and London in 1913.

*Weight: 12,000 g, 385 oz 17 dwt*

*Height 97cm, 38.2 in*

*Length: 102 cm, 40.1in*

Resting on four wheels, the hull is decorated in repoussé with marine deities within rocaille cartouches, flanked by two rows of cannons. The prow takes the form of a mermaid holding a coat of arms and an anchor. The deck is animated with figures and supports three masts, the sails finely engraved with armorial bearings surmounted by a helmet and

a papal tiara

Berthold Muller:

As of 1893, he was registered as a “manufacturer’s agent” based out of 165 Wardour Street, London. His son, Berthold Hermann Muller, partnered with him in 1905, and the father-and-son duo went on to establish the firm “B. Muller and Son.” Around the year 1915, during the upheaval that was World War I, the two subtly and cleverly anglicized their trade name to “Berthold Miller & Son,” presumably to avoid the suspicions of an English public that—given the current social and political climate—grew increasingly disenchanted of all things German. Among other avenues of their business, the Mullers were known to import the works of other silversmiths, especially from Germany. This category included Ludwig Neresheimer and Co., one of the leading silversmith firms of Hanau. Importing silver was the Mullers’ stock-in-trade.

A longstanding bastion of free trade, the City of Hanau lay near Frankfurt, heading in the direction of Wurzburg, Nurnberg, and Augsburg. Hanau enjoyed a long, proud tradition in the silversmithing vein, its town hall having been employed in recent centuries as the “German House of Goldsmiths. There, goldsmiths and silversmiths received instruction in their respective arts, reflecting and representing the knowledge and skills brought over by the Huguenots who—fleeing religious persecution in their native France—had settled in Hanau in the late 1500s.

Because of Hanau’s laxer laws where reproductions and hallmarking were concerned, its metalsmiths were able to produce large quantities of “antique silver”—copies of silver works from France, England, and elsewhere, which were either exact replicas of or pieces heavily inspired by the originals—and sell these all over Europe and beyond. Led by men like August Schleissner, the aforementioned Ludwig Neresheimer, and Jean Schlingloff, Hanau had thus found a unique niche in the silver market.

With Mullers’ 1915 change of name to “Berthold Miller and Son,” the company rebranded itself as a wholesale silversmith and jeweller, specialising in the reproduction of antique silver, enamels, ivories, miniatures, and more.

References:

- (1) Campbell, Gordon, ed. (2006). *The Grove Encyclopaedia of Decorative Arts, Volume 1*. Oxford University
- (2) Lightbown, R. W. (1978). *Secular Goldsmith's Work in Medieval France: A History*. London: Society of Antiquaries of London
- (3) Steele, Philip (1995). *Castles*. New York: Kingfisher. p. 36

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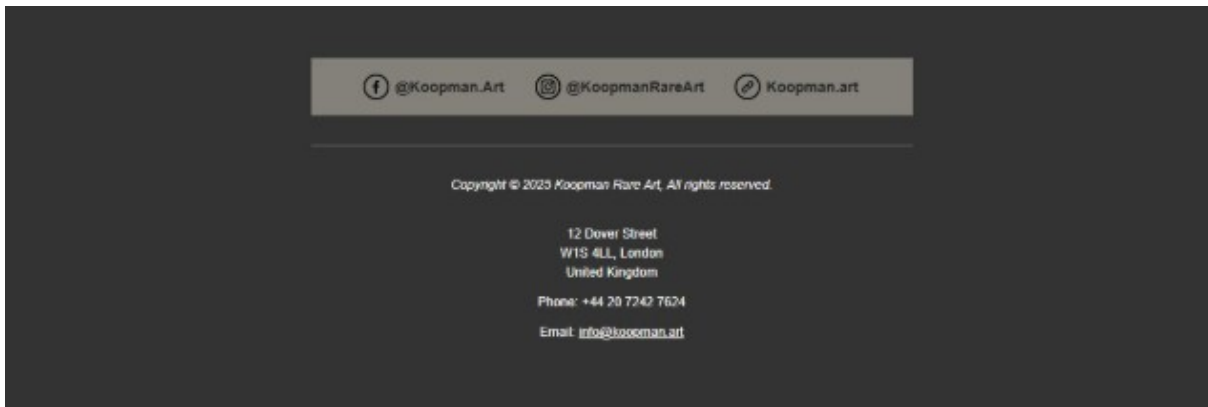
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