

# Koopman Rare Art

## Reflections on Silver in Art - An Introduction

Evie Nicholson

Working at Koopman and being surrounded by silver every day means that now wherever I go I have a magpie instinct. Not only am I drawn to pieces of silver but also depictions of silver (as well as jewellery and Kunstskammer) in art. Silver has always occupied a position in painting. Before it became a subject of focused attention, it appeared in artworks showing it as part of daily life, with cups, plates, candlesticks, and tea services often depicted. When discussing silver with people in the gallery and at fairs, we often say how silver not only showed material wealth but also ritual, taste, and social order. The same goes for its use in painting. Artists also seem to be drawn to painting silver, attempting to depict the way it reflects the light as a way of showing off their skill and how they can handle the light.



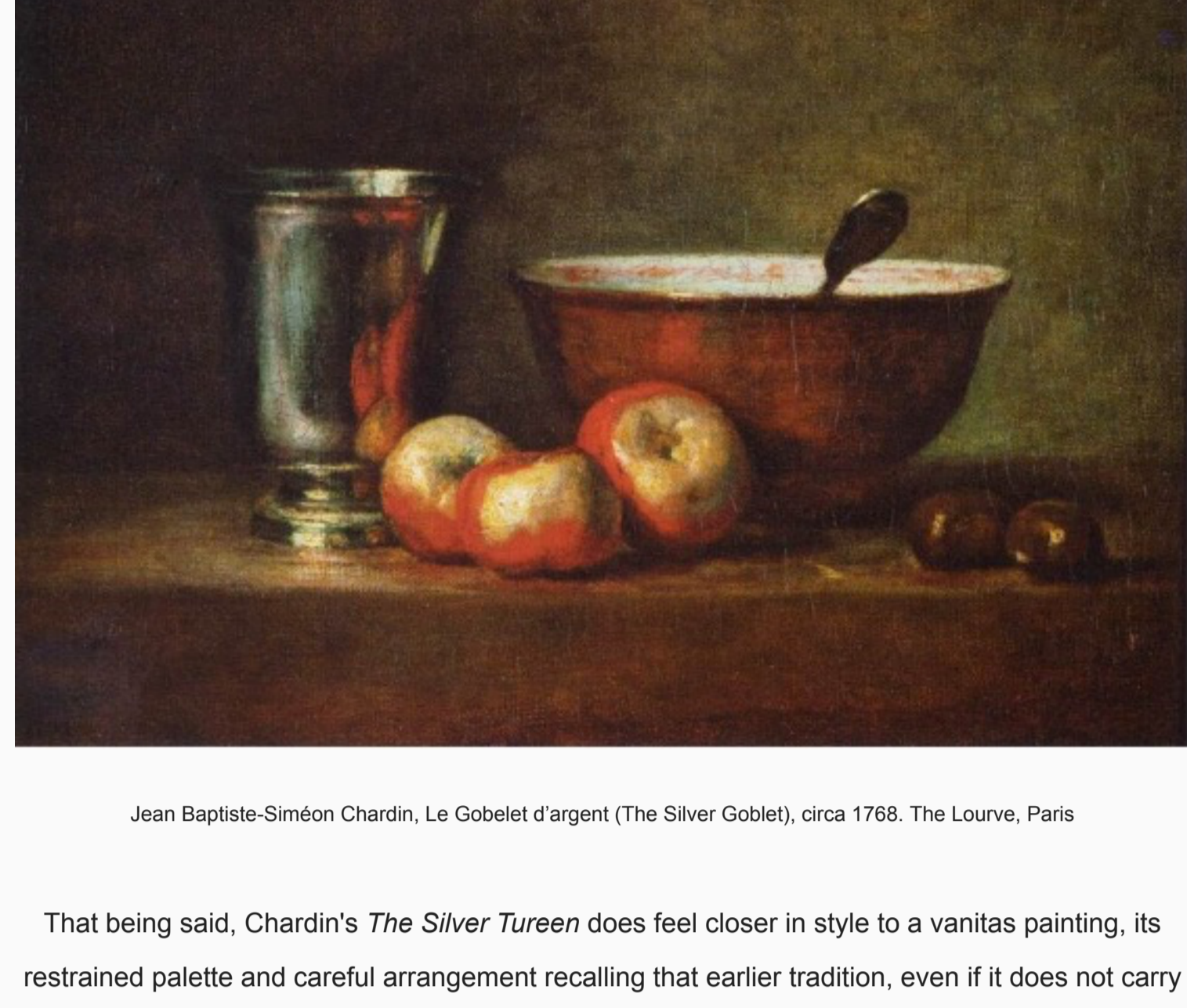
Willem Claesz. Heda, *Still Life with a silver-gilt-mounted nautilus cup, a beaker on its side, a peeled lemon on a plate, oyster shells, a blue and white porcelain bowl, a silver salt cellar and other objects on a stone ledge, in an arched niche, 1655. Private Collection*

In early modern European painting, particularly within the tradition of Dutch Golden Age painting in the 17th Century, silver objects became central to the genre of still life. Artists such as Willem Claesz Heda and Pieter Claesz depicted pewter plates, chased goblets and partially polished vessels often reflecting their surroundings. As well as showing their technical skill as above, these works often carried moral undertones. The silver is frequently shown tarnished, marked, or set beside half emptied cups. Alongside half eaten food, rotting fruit, broken glasses, skulls and clocks, these objects show the transience of time and the fragility of worldly possessions, aligning silver with the broader visual language of vanitas.



Pieter Claesz, *Still Life with Drinking Vessels, 1649. The National Gallery, London*

In the eighteenth century silver was also prominent in French painting. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's work sits neatly between the vanitas paintings of Dutch still life and the more composed interiors of the eighteenth century. His paintings often show quiet domestic scenes with pieces of silver, but without the symbolism of excess or decay. Instead, these objects are given a sense of stillness, playing subtly with light and surface.



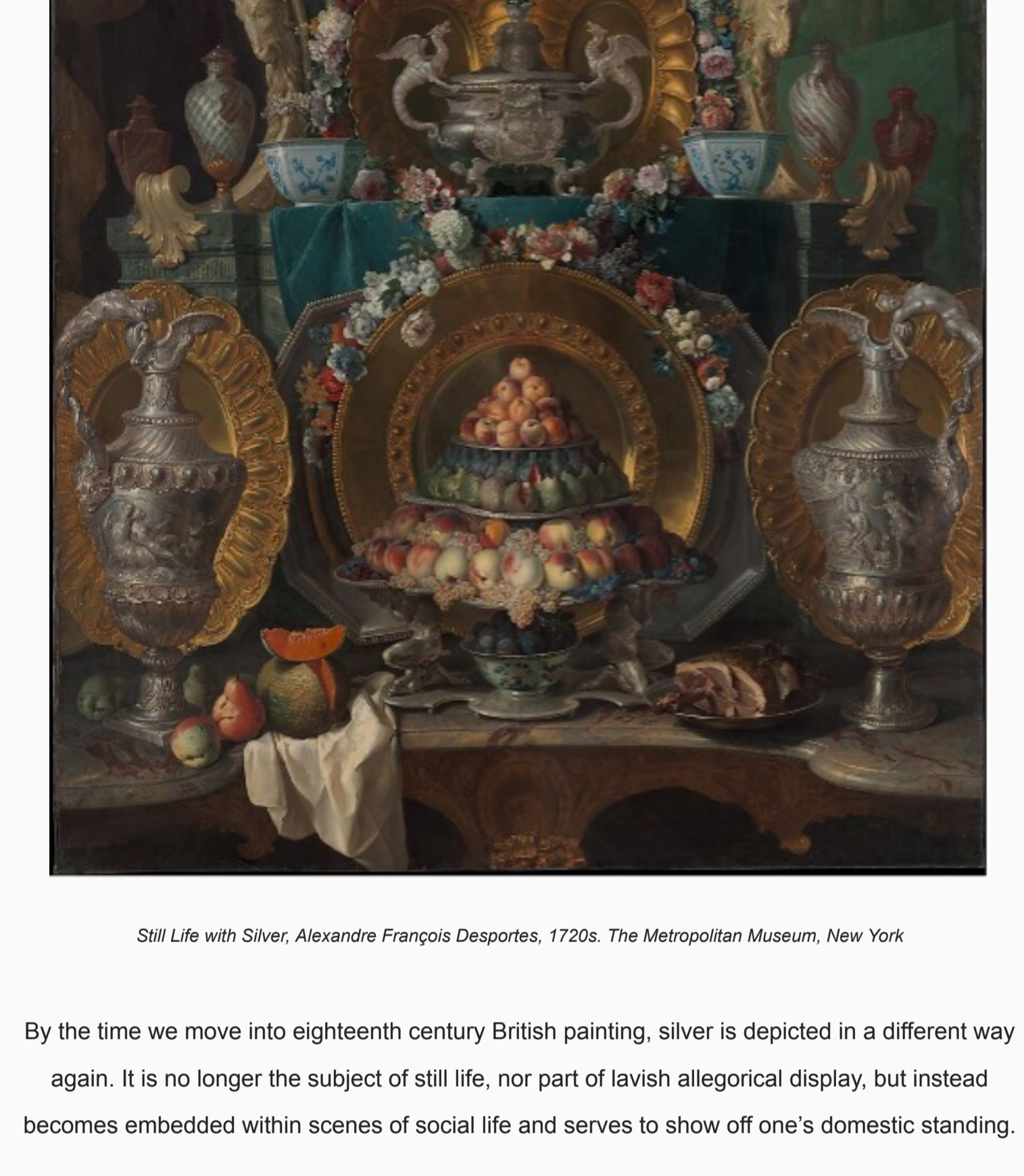
Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *Le Gobelet d'argent (The Silver Goblet), circa 1768. The Louvre, Paris*

That being said, Chardin's *The Silver Tureen* does feel closer in style to a vanitas painting, its restrained palette and careful arrangement recalling that earlier tradition, even if it does not carry the same moral message.



Jean-Siméon Chardin, French, *The Silver Tureen, circa 1728-30. The Metropolitan Museum, New York*

In contrast, there is the more overt opulence of French painting such as *Still Life with Silver* by Alexandre François Desportes. Here the composition is filled with abundance: sculpture, flowers, glass, silver ewers and silver-gilt trays all crowd together to create a richly layered and decorative scene.



Still Life with Silver, Alexandre François Desportes, 1720s. The Metropolitan Museum, New York

By the time we move into eighteenth century British painting, silver is depicted in a different way again. It is no longer the subject of still life, nor part of lavish allegorical display, but instead becomes embedded within scenes of social life and serves to show off one's domestic standing.



Johann Joseph Zoffany, *Queen Charlotte with her Two Eldest Sons, circa 1765. The Royal Collection Trust*

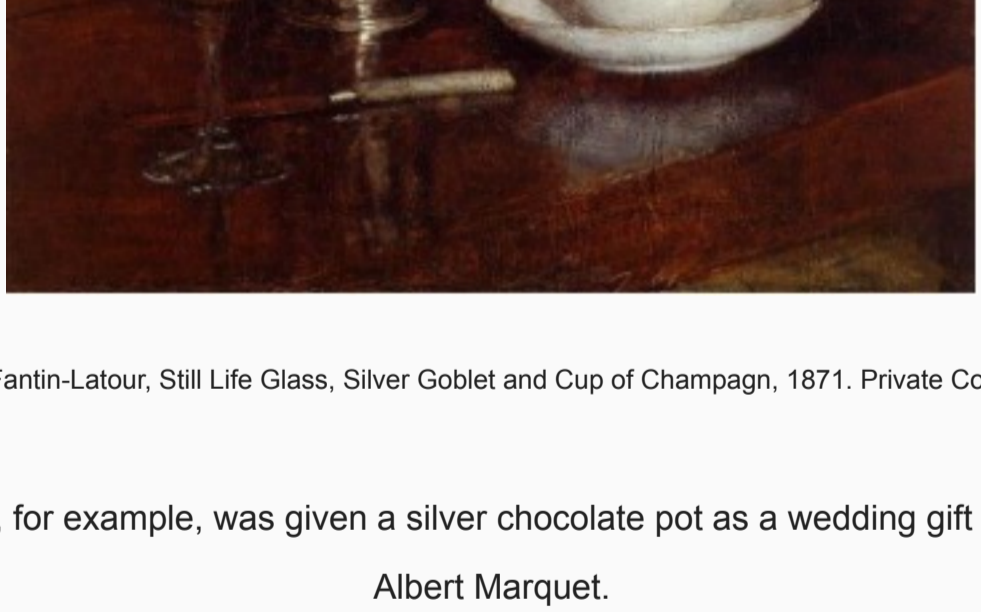
Silver appears to sit comfortably within domestic scenes and conversation pieces. In British painting, it often accompanies rituals of tea drinking, hospitality and polite society. Artists such as Johann Zoffany and William Hogarth included silver objects within their carefully staged interiors, reflecting not only light but also the structures of class and etiquette. This marks a shift: silver is no longer presented as excess, but instead as a marker of civility and one's place within society.

Hogarth's link with silver through his engravings is perhaps something to return to in another article.



William Hogarth, *The Strode Family, circa 1738. Tate Britain, London*

Moving into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, artists seem to look back at silver in a quieter way, focusing more on observation and on the object as part of the composition itself.



Henri Fantin-Latour, *Still Life Glass, Silver Goblet and Cup of Champagne, 1871. Private Collection*

Henri Matisse, for example, was given a silver chocolate pot as a wedding gift by fellow artist Albert Marquet.



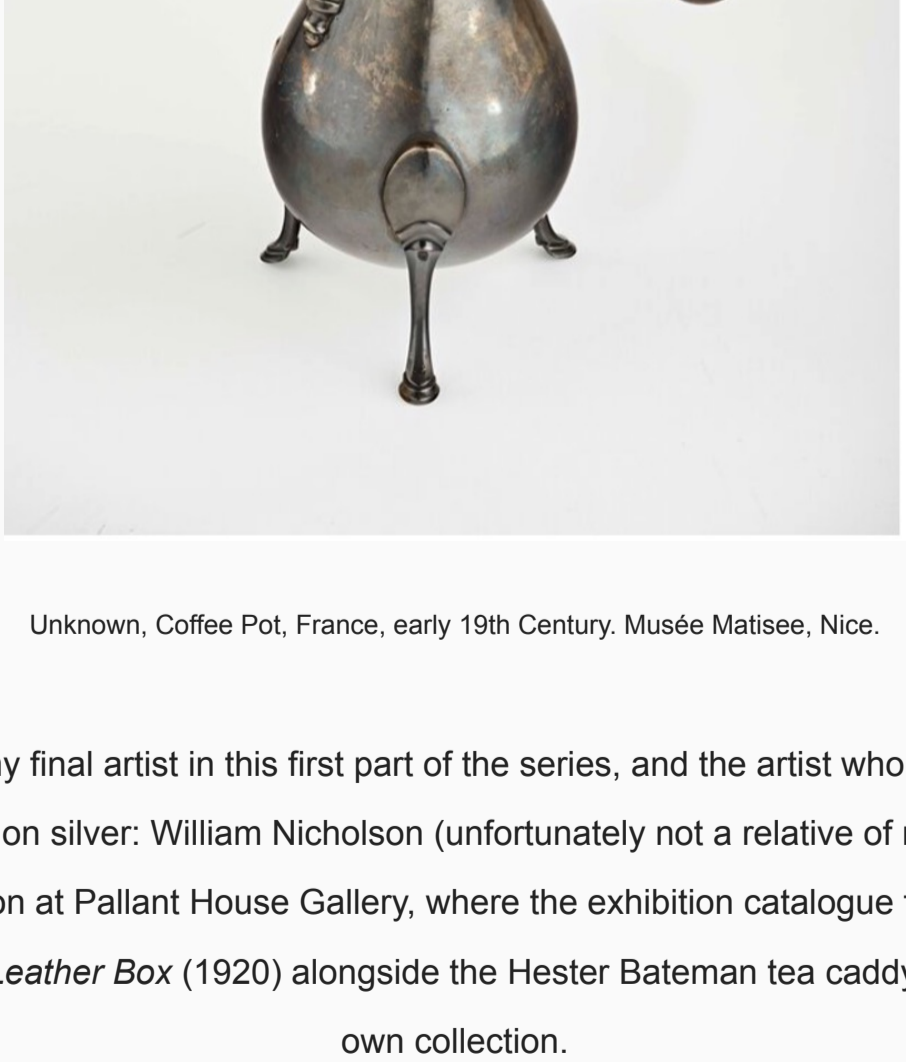
Henri Matisse, *Still Life with Blue Tablecloth, 1909. State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg*

He returns to it repeatedly in his still lifes, depicting it in different ways across several works, and even using it as a vase in *Bouquet de fleurs dans la chocolatière*.



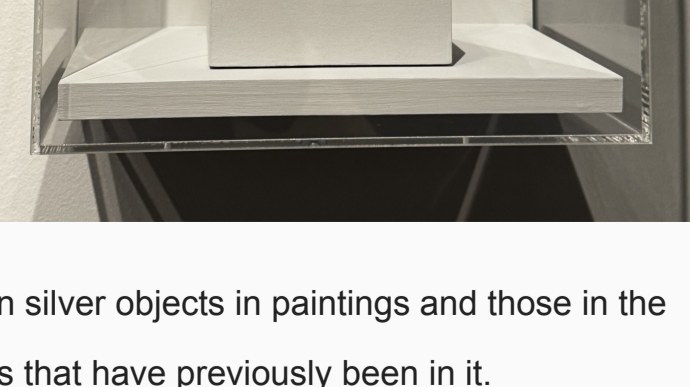
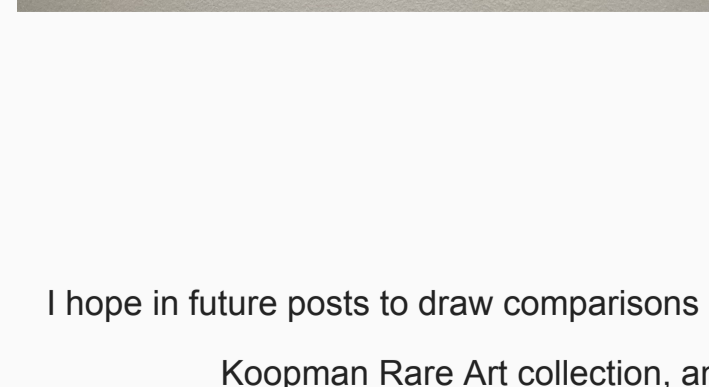
Henri Matisse, *Bouquet de fleurs dans la chocolatière, 1902. Musée national Picasso-Paris*

The chocolate pot now sits in the *Musée Matisse, Nice*, and I always find it interesting when you can see the original object that an artwork is based on. It not only creates a narrative but also gives an insight into an artist's inspiration and the way they approached looking and depiction.



Unknown, *Coffee Pot, France, early 19th Century. Musée Matisse, Nice*

This leads me to my final artist in this first part of the series, and the artist who will be the focus of my next reflections on silver: William Nicholson (unfortunately not a relative of mine!). In particular, the recent exhibition at Pallant House Gallery, where the exhibition catalogue features *The Silver Casket and Red Leather Box* (1920) alongside the Hester Bateman tea caddy from Nicholson's own collection.



I hope in future posts to draw comparisons between silver objects in paintings and those in the Koopman Rare Art collection, and works that have previously been in it.

