



A Highly Important Soup Tureen Formed as a Green Turtle

George II

London, 1750

Maker's Mark of Paul De Lamerie

Length: 47 cm, 18 5/8 in

Weight: 15,018 g, 482 oz 16 dwt

Realistically modelled as a green turtle resting on it's shell and four legs, the cover formed as the lower shell or plastron and with young turtle finial, the shell or carapace finely chased and engraved, fully marked shell and plastron rim.

This extraordinary tureen is an extremely important addition to Paul de Lamerie's surviving body of work. During his long career, perhaps the only works of comparable sculptural realism are the most beautiful small shell-form dishes of the 1730s. P.A.S. Phillips in Paul de Lamerie, His Life Work, London. 1935, p. 110, describes one from the collection of the Earl Spencer as being "one of the surpassing wonders of de Lamerie's creation. If this piece were not made of silver we could imagine that we were holding a veritable shell with its encrustaceons taken direct from the bed of the sea". In both the case of the shells and the turtle tureen, there can be no doubt that the silversmith worked directly from an actual example in the workshop. In the case of the shells, they may have been cast from mould taken from a real shell but, as the body of the tureen is raised, the silversmith would have had to copy every detail by hand. It is an astonishing work of art from a period late in Lamerie's working life.

The only other recorded English 18th century tureen incorporating silver in the form of a turtle appears to be that made by Paul Crespin, also of 1750, now in the collection of the Marquess of Bath at Longleat. The bowl is made of an actual turtle shell within silver mounts. It is perhaps significant that both Lamerie

and Crespin retailed each other's work. Although this seems to have been mainly confined to the 1720's it implies quite a close working relationship and it is tempting to speculate that Lamerie might have seen the Crespin example in making.

We know from the amount of tortoiseshell (a misnomer for turtle-shell) used in snuff-boxes, and on a larger scale in boule furniture, that turtles were being ported in considerable quantities. Turtles were not only imported for their shells but also for their meat, the Green Turtle (*Chelonia Mydas*) was said to be the best for eating, as recorded in *The Gentlemen's Magazine*, February 1750: "Turtles are found as frequently upon the coasts in America, as in Asia and Africa. There are four kinds, the trunk turtle, the black bill, the loggerhead and the green, but the flesh of the last only is reckoned wholesome". An even earlier reference from 1657 also speaks of the superior qualities of the Green turtle (a third kind called the loggerhead and Hawksbill) far excelling the other two (loggerhead and Hawksbill) wholesomeness and rareness of taste."

It was found that if the turtle was kept in a tank of fresh water they could be brought back to Europe alive and then cooked "in the West Indian fashion". Numerous contemporary references extol the merits of turtle meat and soup. A turtle dinner was seen as the height of extravagance and luxury. Robert Adam, when bemoaning his clients parsimony, complains that they are not only bad at paying him but, even when they do, they "give nothing worth taking. So may the devil damn them altogether. I'll turn soap-boiler and tallow chandler; they grow rich and eat turtle." The cost of live turtles was high and this led to the creation of "mock" turtle soup, an ersatz creation fashioned from the cooking of a calf head. *The Gentlemens Magazine*, 13 July 1754 records the presentation of a turtle by Lord Anson: The Right Hon The Lord Anson made a present to the gentlemen of White's Coffee House, of a turtle which weighed 300 weight, and which laid five eggs still in their possession. The shell was four feet three inches long and about three feet wide. This huge example is by no means the largest. Chamber's *Cyclopaedia* of 1738 informs the reader that: "On the Brazilian shore they are said to be so big as sometimes to dine four score men; and that in the Indian sea the shells serve the natives for boats in the island of Cuba they are of such a bulk, that they will creep along with five men on their backs." Robinson Crusoe, by Daniel Defoe, published in 1719 describes the most famous of castaways dining on turtle meat: June 17 I spent in cooking the turtle; I found in her three score eggs". The fashion for turtle soup continued into the 19th century as shown by the existence of a number of old Sheffield Plate soup tureens formed a turtles. Moreover, Sara Williams in *The Art of Dining*, 1993 describes a dinner enjoyed by The Rev. Thomas Talbot at Saltram in 1811:

At dinner we had nothing less than two Earls and a turtle. Lord Paulet (a most profoundly stupid Lord he seems though very good-natured). Lord Mount Edgecumbe [sic] was extremely amusing and gave us some excellent imitations and We dined in the great dining room and had the very best exertions of Mr Howse, the cook, put forth, which he certainly did with consirable effect, being pronounced one of the most accomplished Turtle dressers of the Age, which certainly, and accompanied with Ice Lime Punch cannot be pronounced a very bad sort of diet."

It has not, as yet, been possible to establish by whom the tureen was commissioned. On the exterior cover there are signs of the erasure of a crest. Spectrographic analysis confirms that all the metal in the tureen is consistent with an 18th century date. This includes an inserted disc beneath the finial, which can only be explained by the removal of a coat of arms on the interior of the cover or perhaps, more likely, by a last minute change in the design of the finial. While such a piece might well have been commissioned by a wealthy landowner from Jamaica or the Carolinas, it is also equally possible that an English trading company might have ordered such a tureen. The tureen appears to have been first recorded when it was offered for sale at Christie's in 1906 by the estate of the late Richard Hill. He also sold further of silver but nothing in comparison to the turtle tureen is wife Evereld pieces (d.1906),

daughter of Rev. George Hustler of Weald Manor, Oxfordshire had inherited a considerable amount of property and silver from her wealthy Quaker grandfather but there is no indication in her will that the tureen belonged to him. When offered for sale in 1906 the tureen did not sell, but was presumably purchased very soon afterwards by the firm of Elkington and Co. as it was recorded as being in their possession when illustrated in Sir Charles Jackson's *History of Old English Plate*, published in 1911. It changed hands very shortly thereafter, as it reappeared at Christie's in 1914 as part of the collection formed by Geraldine, purchased by the Swedish (d.1914). This time it was purchased by Countess of Milltown Ambassador to the court of St. James Count Wrangel. His wife had been born a Baour and was the last surviving member of a wealthy Bordeaux wine-making and shipping family. The Wrangels returned to Sweden after the end of the First for a dinner held World War, and in 1932 used the tureen as a centrepiece in honour of King Gustaf V of Sweden when it was greatly admired. During the Second World War, it was placed for safe-keeping in the National Museum, Stockholm. Eventually it passed to her nephews, the current owners

Literature:

C J. Jackson, *An Illustrated History of English Plate*, London, 1911, p. 817-818 illustrated fig. 1056