

The Unmaking of Metalwork in Early Modern Europe:
Events of Liquidation, 1527–1636

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Abstract
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This dissertation explores an understudied process in the history of human artifacts: the melting down of gold and silver objects to produce new forms. It frames as “events of liquidation” a series of contexts in early modern Europe in which large amounts of precious metalwork were smelted; in so doing, this study reconstructs the circumstances—confessional change, fiscal crisis, war—that sent long-protected sacred and secular treasures to the crucible. Although often characterized as mere financial expediency, the melting down of gold and silver plate could serve as a powerful symbolic gesture, creating material symbols of unity and performing priorities of value for communities facing significant upheaval. For those who resisted or resented liquidation campaigns, attending to and remembering the provenance of reformed metalwork—what it used to be—constituted a mode of resistance to the deforming powers of the furnace.

Part One, “Confession,” considers cases in which confessional change or conflict precipitated the liquidation of church treasure, resulting in a literal “re-formation” that fulfilled the requirements of newly reformed communities. The first chapter summarizes the various fates of metalwork in Europe’s Protestant Reformations. It takes as a case study the city of Bern, Switzerland, which followed Zwinglian tenets of reform in 1529 by melting down hundreds of pounds of ecclesiastical plate, a process partly directed by the artist, writer, and city official Niklaus Manuel Deutsch. The second chapter investigates the context of Münster, whose radical Anabaptists outlawed money and private property in 1534, striking new metallic tokens from collected communal treasure. The third chapter moves temporally into the Thirty Years’ War and

geographically to the city of Paderborn, where a Protestant military commander looted a beloved silver shrine from the cathedral treasury and made anti-clerical coins from its silver.

Part Two, “Emergency,” focuses on two events in which plate was liquidated during military engagements. It introduces the category of *Notklippen* (emergency coins), currency manufactured hurriedly from precious metalwork to pay soldiers during a siege or while on campaign. Although designed as temporary, these tokens gained a souvenir value that stabilized them because of their role in pivotal events. Coin cabinets and early numismatic publications were two mechanisms through which *Notklippen* were preserved, discussed, and disseminated. The fourth chapter focuses on the Sack of Rome in 1527, when Pope Clement VII was held captive and forced to melt down papal treasures to pay a ransom to imperial forces, a task performed in part by the sculptor Benvenuto Cellini. The fifth chapter turns to gold and silver *Klippen* produced during the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1529; these coins, as visceral anti-Ottoman propaganda, quickly became collector’s items. A brief coda, “Conquest,” turns to Tenochtitlán / New Spain and ingots poured from the liquidated remains of pre-Columbian metalwork confiscated by the Spanish.

The Unmaking of Metalwork makes central what has long been considered to be an epistemological endpoint in art historical studies: the moment at which the object’s form is “lost” in metal’s transit from solid to liquid. It redefines that moment as a crux demanding a truly materialist methodology, which aims to restore to the history of static objects the movement of matter separate from form.

All alter, nothing finally decayes:
Hether and thether still the Spirit straves;
Guest to all Bodies: out of beasts it flyes
To men, from men to beasts; and neuer dyes.
As pliant wax each new impression takes;
Fixt to no forme, but still the old forsakes;
Yet it the same: so Soules the same abide,
Though various figures their reception hide.

- George Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis, Englished, Mythologiz'd . . .* (1632)

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