Dutch Silver in Dublin

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As a mere dilettante lover of antique silver, I am glad to be able to present an unknown piece of Dutch silver to my friend Th. H. Lunsingh Scheurleer, whose blend of patient and penetrating research with intuitive insight I have always admired – and envied.

The Dutch visitor to the admirable silver collection in the National Museum of Ireland at Dublin is surprised to recognize a small basket as being evidently of Amsterdam make (fig. 1). Examination of the hallmark reveals that it dates from 1776 and was executed by the Amsterdam silversmith Reynier Brandt. This master was born in Wesel in 1702, where he was christened on 3 March in the Matena church. In or even before 1730 he must have come to Amsterdam, where he acquired citizenship in 1734 and was admitted to the guild of silversmiths in the same year. Three years earlier, on 7 January 1731, he had, however, already stood godfather to Reinier Swierink, a son of the weaver of silk stockings Hendrik Swierink and Maria van Wierop. After the mother of his godchild had become a widow, Brandt married her on 16 May 1737, on which occasion the silversmith Gerrit Boetink or Boete acted as witness. The couple lived on the Lauriersgracht. The stepson of Reynier Brandt, Reinier Swierink, as well as his son Gerrit, chose in their turn to become silversmiths. Brandt died in 1788 and was buried in the Westerkerk in Amsterdam on 11 December.

Reynier Brandt seems to have specialised in the making of silver baskets. Several examples of his hand have been preserved, most of them in the Louis-XV style, but some also in the Louis-XVI style. Brandt, however, was certainly not the only Amsterdam silversmith to whom one could turn to command such a piece, as is proven by the beautifully executed baskets preserved of other Amsterdam masters from the same period, like Frederik Manicus, Svalte Stridbeck, Barend Swiering and Jan Buysen.

It is noticeable that also in the 18th century many gifted foreign silversmiths were attracted to settle down in prosperous Amsterdam, where they worked both for the local clientele of rich merchants and for export. It has appeared that between the years 1760 and 1790 no less than 175 gold- and silversmiths, born elsewhere, were practising in Amsterdam. The basket in Dublin (length 28.5 cm, weight 675 gram) has a pierced wall consisting of trellis work with rosettes. In the centre of each long side is a bow with a loop from which a medallion hangs down and through which pass two of the eight garlands around the basket. The undulating upper edge, the base and the handles are bordered by a ribbed band traversed at regular intervals by oblique chain-like narrow bands. Between the trellis
work and the base is a row of open ovals connected by small discs. Beneath medallions and handles are small legs; in contrast to the main part in Louis-XVI style, these four legs and the ornaments on top of the handle are still in Louis-XV style.

Probably such baskets were used for serving pastry, while the somewhat larger examples functioned as bread-baskets. The latter were, however, often supplied with a loose inner framework with round openings, in which bottles for oil and vinegar could be placed, crowned in the middle with a silver castor for pepper. Thus by this addition the basket could be used equally for bread and on the dinner-table.

Such a bread-basket, of which the decoration is nearly identical, made by Reynier Brandt (length 39 cm) has been preserved (fig. 2). The marks show, that in this case the object was made two years earlier, in 1774. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam owns an equally related basket from 1775 (fig. 3). There, however, the still rather rococo inspired voluted feet, have been replaced by much more classical claws clasping a ball.

Unfortunately, nothing much is known about the provenance of the Dublin basket; it was bought by the Museum in 1905. Nevertheless it is an agreeable surprise to be confronted on a visit to this Irish museum with such an attractive example of the Dutch art of silversmithwork from the 18th century.