

FINE SILVER-GILT BOX WITH MEDALLION OF CATHERINE II. FROM RUSSIA

Object number :

Russia/St. Petersburg, around 1775

Medal: silver, minted

Diameter: 9.4 cm (3.7 in.), weight: 320 g (11.2 oz)

Timofey Ivanov, medalist of the mint in St. Petersburg (active 1745–1796)

Provenance: Christie's New York, April 28, 1992, Lot 79

Pictures





Detailed Description

Detailed information

The classic-looking, round silver box impresses with its muted design. Any means of elaborate decoration was dispensed with to focus on the medallion of Catherine the Great in the centre of the lid, thereby emphasising its significance. Instead of intricate decoration, the Russian tsarina's bust is framed by a multi-profiled, gilded rim. Her portrait is inscribed with the inscription: “VON GOTTES GNADEN JEKATERINA II. EMPRESS AND ABSOLUTE MONARCH OF ALL RUSSIA”.

Catherine II, clad in a tight-fitting undergarment resembling a chain mail shirt and a flowing cloak with a medal ribbon, decorated with a laurel wreath, stands in clear contrast to the delicate little crown and the partially pinned-up curls cascading down her neck. The tsarina does not allow herself to be portrayed playfully in a three-quarter portrait, as most of her contemporaries did. Like the Roman emperors, she appears aloof in profile. She emphasizes her equality through her choice of portrait type and her antique-style clothing. This demonstrates her military strength and also shows her feminine side.

The inside of the completely removable lid forms the frame for the reverse of the silver-gilt medal. With great sensitivity and the aim of preserving the medal in its entirety, the goldsmith inserted it into the lid, which fits perfectly on the box: The Roman goddess Minerva can be seen with a Corinthian helmet and crest. With an armored top and a cloak draped loosely over her shoulders, Minerva stands in contrapposto on her right leg, while her left leg is slightly bent back. In her left hand she holds an upright lance, while with her outstretched right hand she holds a staff of Mercury, with which she points to a merchant ship with a Russian flag to her right.

The model for the depiction of Minerva was an ancient Roman model, which was available to the medal maker either as an ancient original, a drawing or a graphic. Ancient bronze statuettes of the Roman Minerva (inverted and without the staff of Mercury) from the 1st/2nd century AD are known, which in turn refer to Greek models of Athena from the 4th century BC. In addition, several coin portraits of Emperor Domitian from the 1st century have survived: Domitian had the goddess Minerva placed opposite his coin portrait in the reverse to demonstrate his closeness to the Roman deity.

Tsarina Catherine the Great joins the ranks of the Roman emperors not only through the portrait type and the laurel wreath, but also through the association of her own portrait with Minerva - like Domitian. She also cleverly refers to her extensive education and at the same time legitimizes her own claim to power.

Behind Minerva you can see a body of water on which a fleet is sailing. The shore is defended by soldiers pointing cannons at the water. To the left of Minerva are war trophies: A cannon with three cannonballs lies next to a quiver of arrows, the wheel of a gun carriage and a drum. Three shields with the inscriptions KER., KI. and JENI. (of the sea fortresses Kerch, Kiburn, Yenikale) lean against a pedestal on which is a raised breastplate with helmet, flags and the coat of arms with the Russian double-headed eagle. ”.

The inscription at the top reads “DURCH FESTEN WILLEN, VERSTAND UND KRAFT” under the cut are the words: “DER FRIEDEN MIT DER OTTOMANISCHEN PFORTE WURDE AM 10.JULI des JAHRES 1774 GESCHLOSSEN. The medal commemorates the peace treaty of July 10, 1774 in Kütschük-Kainadrschi (today Bulgaria), which sealed the end of the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774. In addition

to major territorial gains, the peace treaty gave Catherine the Great important trade routes on the Black Sea and free passage to the Bosporus.

If you compare both sides of the medal, the similarity between Minerva's clothing and that of the tsarina on the coin's portrait immediately catches the eye. This was chosen for political reasons. As an enlightened absolutist ruler, Catherine can be depicted like Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, science, art and warfare, a type of image that can also be found in Catherine's early painted and sculptural portraits.

HOW TO USE THE BOX

The interior of the box was ennobled by its complete, well-preserved gilding on the one hand, while on the other hand it could be used functionally for a wide variety of purposes: vessels with hinges were particularly suitable as tabatiers. The present box could have been used for a multitude of uses; for storing confectionery, pills, jewelry, cosmetics, beauty plasters or billets. Scuff marks on the outside of the box indicate that it was actually used and carried around.

COMMEMORATIVE MEDALS

Catherine the Great had commemorative medals minted to mark important political events in order to demonstrate her military victories or diplomatic successes, consolidate her rule and at the same time have suitable gifts and awards available for the nobility, governors, diplomats or important military personnel. Medals of this type were minted in silver and gold and awarded according to social or military rank.

NOBLE PRESENTS

Bonbonnières and tabatiers with a portrait of the ruler were popular at European courts as a token of favor and thanks for services rendered and as a sign of closeness to the monarch. Gold boxes were used as gifts of chivalry and travel gifts by aristocrats. Artists, actors, musicians, doctors and officers could receive silver boxes, while servants received gifts of money. The Russian monarch Catherine II was known for her generous distribution of tabatiers and portrait boxes - their material value not only made them a popular gift, but also served to increase her own popularity. In this practice, Catherine took her cue from the French court. She preferred the use of clear classicist forms.

ABOUT THE MEDALLEUR

Timofey Ivanov (1729-1803) was an important medalist at the St. Petersburg mint. He created numerous medals and coins. Ivanov joined the mint in St. Petersburg in 1745 and worked there until 1796.

LITERATURE

Jaques, Susan: The Empress of Art, Catherine the Great and the Transformation of Russia, New York/London 2016

Catherine the Great, An exhibition of the Staatliche Museen Kassel, Wintershall AG, Kassel and RAO Gazprom Moscow, ed. by Hans Ottomeyer and Susan Tipton, exhib. cat. Kassel 1997-1998, Kassel 1997, here pp. 68f. and pp. 178-196 (War and Peace), especially cat. Nos. 248 and 249 (on medals on the occasion of the peace at the Ottoman Gate in 1774)

Seelig, Lorenz: Golddosen des 18. Jahrhunderts aus dem Besitz der Fürsten von Thurn und Taxis, Die Sammlung des Bayrischen Nationalmuseums im Thurn und Taxis Museum Regensburg, ed. by Renate Eikelmann, exhib. cat. Munich 2007-2008, Munich 2007, pp. 17-58 (on box collections and courtly presents)

Tipton, Susan: The Russian Minerva, Catherine the Great and the Iconography of the Enlightenment, in: exhib. cat. Kassel 1997-1998, pp. 73-80

Tsar's Gold, 100 Masterpieces of Goldsmith Art from the State Hermitage St. Petersburg, The Guild of Foreign Masters, ed. by Fritz Falk, exhib. cat. Pforzheim 1995-1996, Munich/Stuttgart 1995

ONLINE LINKS

https://www.khm.at/de/objektdb/detail/67178/

(Imperial statuette of Minerva from the 1st-2nd century AD, Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna)

https://ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18231809

(Aureus of Domitian, in the reverse: Minerva with spear, dated 92-94 AD, Roman Imperial period)