

# AMIR MOHTASHEMI



## **Silver Communion Cup**

Probably Batavia (present-day Jakarta), Indonesia, 17th century

Gilded silver and silver filigree

13.5cm high

Stock no.: A5867

Provenance: Purchased by a Danish Private Collector (1848-1932); thence by descent.

This standing cup and cover rises from a circular, high-stepped base, its baluster stem fitted with two shouldered knobs. The bowl is of double-wall construction, with a plain inner liner made of sheet silver, fire-gilt on both the inside and outside, and an outer filigree 'cage'. The stepped cover, also double-walled and with a gilt-silver liner and filigree 'cage', is topped with a shouldered knob serving as a finial. While the filigree on the foot, stem, and cover features the typical combination of thicker flat wire for the frame and twisted wire forming spirals as the filling, combined with serpentine friezes more commonly seen, the openwork rosettes and arches with serpentine friezes of the 'cage' bowl are less usual. This cup and cover were likely used in post-Reformation Protestant worship to serve the consecrated wine and bread during Holy Communion. During the Reformation, worship became simpler and more direct. Protestants rejected the Roman Catholic doctrine of 'transubstantiation', which holds that the bread and wine of the Mass are miraculously transformed into Christ's body and blood. Instead, they introduced a symbolic communion service in which the congregation actively participated by regularly receiving both bread and wine, rather than remaining passive observers. Unlike Protestant communion cups, which were invariably fitted with covers, chalices used in Counter-Reformation Catholic Masses tend to lack covers.

This fine silver filigree communion cup reflects Chinese techniques and style, which were widespread in East Asia and practiced by local artisans in South China—Guangzhou, Quanzhou, or Fuzhou—by overseas Chinese craftsman in the Philippines, known locally as *sangleyes*, and by ethnic Chinese silversmiths based in Dutch colonial Batavia.<sup>1</sup> Pieces featuring similar filigree motifs and techniques were recovered from the *Nuestra Señora de la Concepción*, a Manila galleon that sank in 1638 off the Mariana Islands while en route to Acapulco.<sup>2</sup> This little-known treasure includes exceptional gold filigree pieces produced for export, their recurring features suggesting a single workshop, though no precise origin can be determined. Key stylistic elements include serpentine friezes, ‘S’ motifs with coiled ends forming ‘o’ shapes, and pentagonal rosettes with granules, all distinctively Chinese. Similarly decorated objects include a *pili* nut perfume flask with silver filigree mounts, commissioned by Don Baltasar Ruiz de Escalona, treasurer-judge of the Royal Treasury, who died in Manila in 1658. While the flask was undoubtedly made in the Philippines by *sangley* artisans, this communion cup—modelled after contemporary Protestant examples from England or the Netherlands—was more likely produced in Dutch-ruled Batavia. Comparable religious pieces include two pairs of altar cruets, one set belonging to a private collection in Portugal, complete with its original stand and fitted with the initials ‘V’ and ‘A’, for *vinum* and *aqua* in Latin (wine and water), crowning their thumb-pieces. A previous, more traditional view attributed this pair to Portuguese-ruled Goa, but subsequent research, supported by documentary and archaeological evidence, now points to the Philippines or Batavia as the likely production centres, with Chinese craftsmen as the creators.<sup>3</sup> Objects intended for Catholic use were likely produced in the Philippines, whereas those made for Protestant contexts were almost certainly made in Batavia.

[1] For Chinese filigree of the Ming and early Qing dynasty, see Arnaud Bertrand, Hélène Gascuel (eds.), *Ming Gold. Splendours and Beauties of Imperial China* (cat.), Paris: Musée Guimet, 2024. For silver filigree made for export in the Philippines, see Hugo Miguel Crespo. *Choices*. Lisbon: AR-PAB, 2016, pp. 366-381, cat. 32. For export filigree attributed to Dutch-ruled Batavia, see Jan Veenandaal, *Asian Art and Dutch Taste*, The Hague, Waanders Uitgewers Zwolle - Gemeentemuseum, 2014, pp. 122-133.

[2] A. Beatriz Chadour, “The gold jewelry from the *Nuestra Señora de la Concepción*”, in William M. Mathers, Henry S. Parker, Kathleen Copus (eds.), *Archaeological Report. The Recovery of the Manila Galleon Nuestra Senora de la Concepcion*, Sutton, Pacific Sea Resources, 1990, pp. 133-395.

[3] Crespo, Hugo Miguel. *Jewels from the India Run* [Exhibition catalogue]. Lisbon: Fundação Oriente, 2015. pp. 76-78, cat. 56. For the second pair, see Mário Roque et al. (eds.) *Age of Discovery. Portugal, the First Global Empire*. Lisbon: São Roque, Antiques and Art Gallery, 2024. pp. 290-293, cat. 44.