

Laurent Amiot and the Burkheart Jesuit Silver Collection

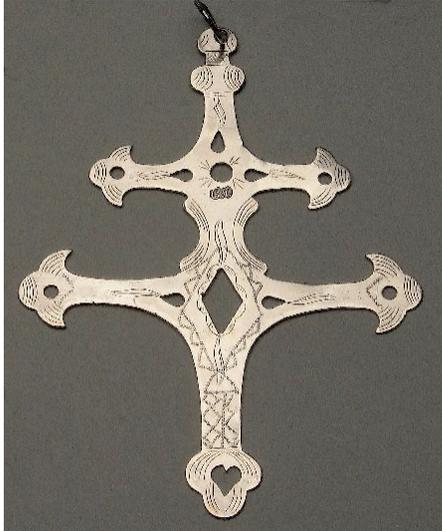
Research Paper by Steve Cox, March 28, 2017

This paper is the result of research I have compiled on a piece of trade silver that I believe has a defining roll in the story of Laurent Amiot, a Canadian silversmith from Quebec, and how one of his pieces of art managed to survive. The subject of this paper is a rare and exotic silver Queen Anne wrist cuff that I believe to have been made by Laurent Amiot in the Louis XVI style.

Before I get into the details of my opinion, I would like to state provenance of this wrist cuff. The exact year the wrist cuff was made can be narrowed down positively to the years between 1750 and 1839. Based upon sound research I believe it was made between 1787 and 1800. It is possible the wrist cuff was made as a domestic piece, and the deer engraving added after it found its way to the Indian trade. For a number of reasons I believe it is more likely it was made specifically as a present for a more important Indian, either male or female. Regardless of when it was made, it found its way into a very rare and almost unknown trade silver collection. The only account I have of this collection is a copy of a letter written by Ashley Wyant to Bill Hastings. Ashley Wyant's background is based on 15 years of private study that culminated with a 7 year appointment to the Smithsonian Institution where his area of expertise was the Material Culture of the Fur Trade. Bill Hastings acquired this wrist cuff and a silver



cross of Lorraine from Ashley years ago. Ashley acquired these pieces sometime earlier from a person that purchased them between 1939 and 1943. This private collection is known as the Burkhart Jesuit Collection. The reason for that name is as follows. During the period between 1939 and 1943, presumably because of loss of revenues by the Catholic Church of Canada due to WW II, unopened cask of valuables left by Indian parishioners as offerings at the various missions and churches in Canada, were sold by weight. This material had not been considered valuable as anything but scrap and was liquidated as such. Most people who bought this material had it melted



French Cross of Lorraine from the Burkhart Jesuit Silver Collection bearing the mark attributed to Charles Arnoldi
Courtesy of Bill Hastings

down and made into domestic silver pieces. Fortunately the previous owner who compiled the collection was too intrigued with the material to destroy it. By 1943 he had made at least two more trips to a place he remembered as being called Burkhart Ontario where the Jesuit Order was selling the cask. He never collected again from any other source. Today, 73 years later, I can find no reference to the place he referred to as Burkhart Ontario. I have no idea if it was a Mission, town, or just a place name. The original



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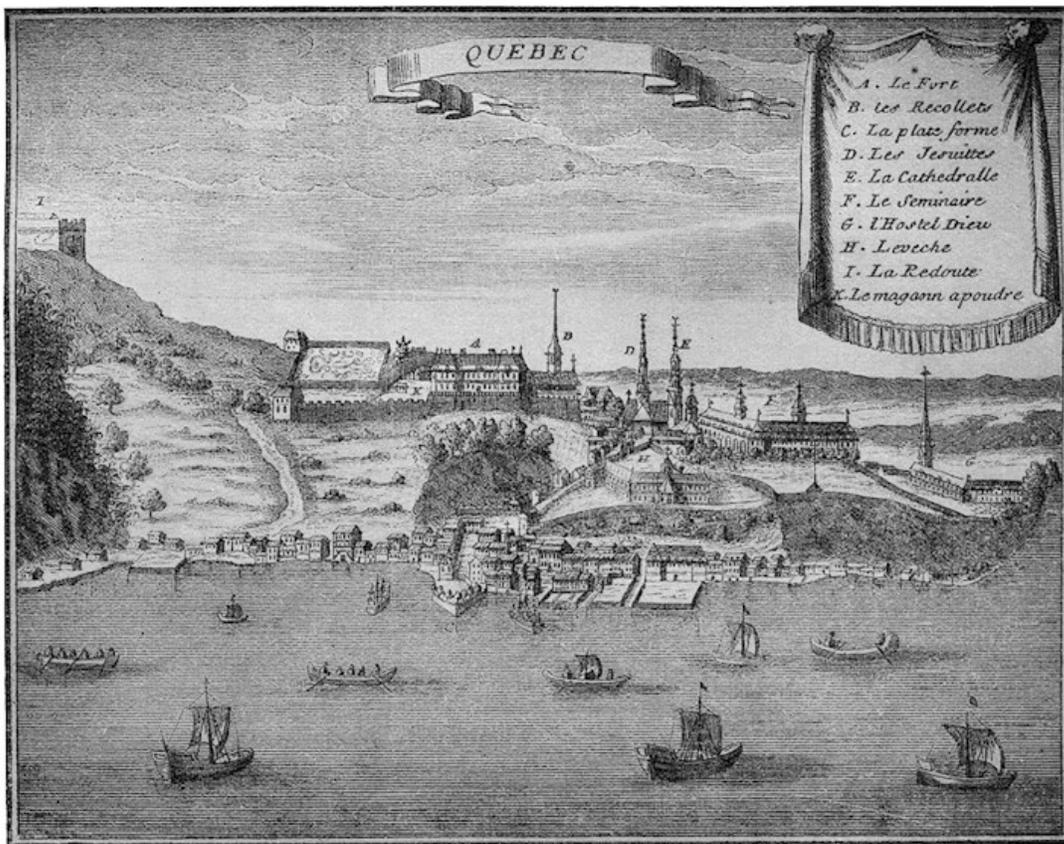
Indian Mother and Child

The Indian Mother pictured wearing the wrist cuff and the Cross of Lorraine, circa 1800
Illustration by the author

collector's name is also lost. A few years back I acquired the wrist cuff from the collection of Bill Hastings. The cross remains in the Hastings collection and is another rare example of what was contained in the Burkhart Jesuit Silver Collection.

The silversmith that I attribute the wrist cuff to is Laurent Amiot. He was born in Quebec, P.Q. Canada, August 10, 1764. He studied from 1778 through 1780 at Petit Seminary de Quebec. He traveled to France about 1782 where he was formally trained as a silversmith. He returned to Quebec in the spring of 1787 and was considered the most important silversmith in Canada, both in quantity as well as in quality. He worked in Quebec until his death on June 3, 1839. He is buried in Saint Anne's Chapel, Notre Dame Cathedral Quebec.

I will start by saying up front, that as of 1998 some qualified Canadian silver authorities had found no examples of Indian Trade Silver that can be readily attributed to Laurent Amiot, however on the other hand there are a good number of equally qualified researchers and collectors that are convinced



that he did make silver for the Indian trade. I do not take issue with either side. There are all too many instances like this, which either can't, or haven't been proven without a doubt. Unlike Europe at this time, there were few laws in America that regulated the manufacture and distribution of Gold and Silver articles. Without such regulations most American made pieces did not carry marks that denoted characteristics like date, purity, tax status, etc. Many maker marks often were never registered, and in many cases have never been identified. Another factor that makes mark identification difficult for most collectors is the use of Pseudo marks. As a rule these marks are designed to look like European town marks, marks of purity, charge or discharge. Few collectors are qualified to tell the difference, but Pseudo marks are found on many American and European made pieces, and for the most part in areas that went un-regulated both in America, and in a few other countries, and particularly in Germany, where they originated. In America the Pseudo marks are more common in Canada. They generally were not meant to deceive but to reflect purity equivalent to what one would find in quality pieces made in Europe.

Examples of Pseudo marks

Until I completed research on the wrist cuff presented here I had no personal opinion on whether or not Laurent Amiot made silver for the Indian trade. The following documentation, photographs, and illustrations will help the reader to understand what I have based my opinion on.



It is common knowledge that large amounts of silver items for the Indian trade were produced in many well known silver smith shops in the Americas. Many of the silversmiths and shops did not advertise this for a

number of reasons, however many did. One can also note in a large number of cases that partners of silversmiths, apprentices, and suppliers working with them did in fact produce trade silver themselves. Many of these cases are documented, but most are not. It is well known that Laurent's brother, Jean-Nicolas Amiot apprenticed for Joseph Schindler, and was married to the sister of Louis Robitaille, each of these men being silversmiths that made vary large amounts of Indian trade silver.

Laurent Amiot in all likelihood apprenticed for his older brother Jean-Nicolas Amiot starting around 1780. Based on this supposition alone I believe it's more likely than not that Laurent Amiot did make silver for the Indian trade. It is also well known that silversmiths that were father and son, Husband and wife, or siblings, often shared common stamps. An example would be the widow of Joseph Schindler using her husbands stamp for years after his death. She was known as The Widow Schindler.

This has been well documented and also occurred before one or the other had a personal stamp of their own. At first glance one would most likely identify the maker mark on this wrist cuff as that of Jean-Nicolas Amiot, but for the previous reasons and



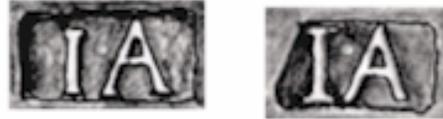
others described later in this paper, I believe this stamp was owned and or used by Laurent Amiot on this wrist cuff. In the 17th and 18th century it was also very common to substitute the letter "I" for the letter "J" as in the common variant of the Jean-Nicolas stamp. Misidentification can also be based on the fact that there have been many variants of the stamps of both of the Amiot's documented. Many of their marks are so similar it would be a challenge for anyone to differentiate based only on the mark. Depending on who is describing the maker mark displayed on this wrist cuff, it might be described as "I pellet A" or "L pellet A" or "Conjoined L pellet A" or "I pellet A".

Marks of Laurent Amiot and Jean-Nicolas Amiot

Laurent Amiot
(1764-1838) Quebec, P.Q.



Jean-Nicolas Amiot
(1750-1821) Quebec, P.Q.



Adding to the previous details regarding the marks, I will say my conclusion is based to a greater degree on the following observations rather than on the marks.

Following is an observation I have made based on test of the silver and careful examination of the piece. A test on the wrist cuff was performed in 2014 using Spectrograph Analysis. The results are as follows; 96.15% Silver, 3.70% Copper, and .15% trace elements. This is important for the following reason. The 96.15% silver and 3.7% Copper content indicates the silver meets the Britannia Standard. The Britannia Standard was introduced in 1697 to prevent the short supply of silver coinage from being clipped or melted to produce church silver or domestic silver. This standard was used until 1720, when the Sterling silver standard was reintroduced. One can now assume with a high degree of accuracy that this wrist cuff was made from silver obtained by the melting of a piece of high quality domestic or church silver produced between 1696 and 1720. This was a very common practice in 18th century America where a silversmith in America could be imprisoned for melting silver coinage. This practice was even more common with high quality pieces that were being made for the Church as



Indian presents, or as presentation pieces where the cost of the silver was not as relevant as it was for more common pieces of trade silver.

Another characteristic that I think would indicate the maker was Laurent Amiot rather than Jean-Nicolas Amiot is the 3rd mark on the piece just above the engraving. This is the Fleur-de-lis. Taking into account that

Laurent had training in France from 1782-1787, and held great admiration for the French silver trade, it is logical to conclude he was aware of how important that symbol was in France. It was used in many contexts by the Silver and Goldsmiths. He is credited with bringing back to America many of the French silversmith styles and traits, the most obvious style being the Louis XVI styles. Much of his later work in domestic silver was also influenced by the English Neoclassic style. By 1800 the most popular silversmiths in Canada, including Robert Cruickshank and Pierre Huguet located in Montreal were imitating his styles.

In conclusion, I have no questions regarding the authenticity of this piece. I will also state that based on my research I believe this wrist cuff was made by Laurent Amiot and not his brother Jean-Nicolas Amiot. I hope some day to learn more details about the Burkhart Jesuit Silver Collection and maybe this research paper will help.

In closing I would like to state a quote found in The Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Volume IIV 1836-1850, it was said, *“with Amiot, working in silver was no longer considered a craft but an art, and from then on the silversmith was no longer a craftsman but indeed an artist”*.

Best Regards, Steve Cox

Web site to be published by early summer stevecoxresearch.com

Acknowledgments

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