

Silver Gambling Counters of the Simon van de Passe School

by Colin Narbeth

The collector of Casino chips is often tempted to study the history of gambling which of course takes the collector far back before casinos were introduced. The study of the Mississippi gambling steamers of the early 19th century has attracted a lot of attention - and has plenty of room for enthusiastic researchers. Going back a bit further we find that in Europe gambling in the 16th/17th/18th centuries was a major occupation of the population. Remember, they did not have TV or anything like it and gambling gave a bit of excitement in what was otherwise generally a fairly drab life. Gambling took hold so much that Kings and governments introduced legislation to restrict gaming to certain times of the year - like Christmas, and introduced fines for even the aristocracy, and sometimes prohibited gaming altogether (without much success!).

Of course anything could serve as chips and the most common in Europe were the jetons, primarily introduced for accounting, but later produced simply for gambling. Sometimes, however, very famous engravers would turn their skills to gambling pieces. Without doubt one of the greatest of these was Simon van de Passe. Famous for the quality of his work - particularly in engraving frontispieces and bookplates. He did much work for Royalty and finally became Regius Sculptor to King Christian IV.



Silver container showing portrait of King Charles I on top and his Queen, Henrietta Maria, bottom.



Front and back of the container box

For some six years (1616-1622) he worked in England and established a Van de Passe school continued by his brother Willem. In 1616 Simon had engraved a number of Royal plaques thereby gaining exemption from the monopoly granted to Nicholas Hilliard in the Royal patent of 1st May 1617 for "graving and imprinting medailles" and small portraits of the King. The patent exempted those who worked under "our special warrant or command" and also those who wished to reproduce their own work originally made prior to the patent.

There are many examples of his work in gold and silver in the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum and various museums in his birthplace, Utrecht in the Netherlands. His school produced many silver gambling counters, often in sets of 25 or 36, and encased them in beautifully made silver containers.

The quality of the work is such that experts still discuss the probable methods of production - a discussion which has been going on since at least 1915 when G.F. Hill wrote his treatise "The technique of Simon van de Passe". In 1916 Helen Farquhar wrote extensively on the subject concluding that the probability was that various methods were tried over a period of years and that the more common counters, such as the Full Length sovereigns, were cast. H.C.



Early silver counters of 1616-1625 (re-issued in 1628) show King James I on one side and Prince Charles (to become King Charles I) on the other. His portrait starts with no beard at all – and as he grows up, the beard is added in progressive degrees over the ten years of production.



Carruthers, a practical engraver and jewel -setter “was so good as to look through a large number of counters with me (Helen Farquhar), and whilst pronouncing most of the earlier series to be hand-engraved throughout, he picked out others as showing signs of casting, and others again which were, he said, distinctly the product of a die.” More recently, Mark Jones “The technique of Simon van de Passe re-considered” concluded: “In the light of this it seems probably, that, while de Passe engraved the models for his medals and on occasion, directly engraved medals not intended for reproduction, the reproductive technique used in his workshop was neither stamping in imitation of engraving, nor engraving, whether or not assisted by transfers, but simple casting. Admittedly very skilful casting, of the order seen in contemporary work by Guillaume Dupre and others, and presumably followed by a polishing process which produced the ‘clear and sharp’

surface.” Many numismatists disagree citing the half-length sovereign gambling counters where the quality and sharpness of work on such thin flans mitigates against the casting processes available at the time of King Charles I. The debate continues.

Simon de Passe died in Denmark in 1644. The last gambling counters produced by his school turned away from royal portraits to subjects like “Street Cries” and “Classical portraits” that were not likely to offend either side in the Civil War which ended in the beheading of Charles I.

These gambling counters which average 28mm diameter are now getting hard to come by. Worn pieces of the Full Length sovereigns, the most common, are sometimes found in the London markets at between \$50 and \$100. Extremely fine pieces can be \$200 to \$300. Sothebys

recently illustrated a 34 out of 36 set of these counters together with the container estimated at £600-£800. They went under the hammer at £3000.

A detailed cataloguing of these gambling counters with numerous illustrations can be found in “Jetons, Medalets and Tokens” (British Isles Circa 1558 to 1830), Volume 3, by Michael Mitchiner (Hawkins Publications London 1998) - pages 1661 to 1680.



Left: A typically worn gambling counter by the Simon van de Passe School showing Edward the Confessor. From the most common “full length” sovereign set of 36. These were issued between 1630 and 1635.

Right: The much scarcer “half-length” sovereign set, showing Harold. Issued between 1635 and 1637.

