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## Title of Object

"Feast of the Gods" charger

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** William Pitts; **Manufacturer:** Rundell, Bridge & Rundell

**Date of Object:** 1808

**Accession Number:** 2008.71

**Material/Medium:** Gilt silver

**Department:** Decorative Arts, Textiles and Sculpture

**Culture:** English

**Country:** England

**File Created:** 1/4/2018

**Author of File:** Richard Ploetz

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 1/4/2018

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## Tour Topics

All that glitters, Legacy group tour, wealth, status, Regency, classicism, food and drink, conflict, mythology, classical style, stories/storytelling

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. What is a charger? What do you think this was used for?
  2. What scene does the center of the charger depict?
  3. Why do you think this is made from gilt silver, rather than just silver?
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## Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

The central image is based on a 16th century Venetian bronze relief, representing the apotheosis of Doge Sebastiano Venier, who helped to secure the Holy League's victory in the Battle of Lepanto. In 1719, Bernard de Montfaucon published an engraving of the image in "L'Antiquité Expliquée", titling it "The Wedding of Peleus and Thetis." Rundell, Bridge & Rundell used Montfaucon's engraving as a model, certainly believing it to depict an episode of ancient mythology, as the present title indicates.

However, the two figures in Renaissance Ottoman dress in the background have no place in such iconography, pointing back to the Venetian bronze relief as the original source. (Artsmia)

Silver-gilt, or vermeil in French, is silver gilded with gold. Apart from being much cheaper than gold, large silver-gilt objects are also much lighter and stronger. Fire gilding with mercury dates to at least the 4th century BC and was the most common method—although dangerous to the workers--until the Early Modern period. Today electroplating is the most common method. (Wikipedia)

The Regency style was eclectic, based on the cult of antiquity and borrowing from Roman, Greek and Egyptian designs. To these were added elements taken from nature and from French design of the mid-18th century. Consequently, Regency style was visually very rich and the silver from this period is perhaps the most elaborate and imposing of any British silver. (V&A and Wikipedia)

Interest in ancient Greece was stimulated by the publication of a number of important illustrated books. Greek motifs were very popular. Designers and manufacturers like Rundell, Bridge and Rundell copied or created objects using Classical Greek and Roman shapes. Even though the partners were not silversmiths themselves, they kept close control of their contracted designs. The firm made a range of objects, but was most celebrated for its high-quality, elaborate, Classical-style silver plate which adorned the grandest dining rooms of the day. (V&A)

The Feast of the Gods charger design illustrates the “borrowing” of design from older, classical themes and art works. In this case, a 16th century Venetian bronze relief celebrating the victor of the Battle of Lepanto becomes confused with the Greek theme of the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. As it is “copied” by the silversmith, it becomes the “Feast of the Gods”. (Artsmia)

William Pitts: Pitts seems to have been of the first 19th century silversmiths to incorporate antique plaques or castings of them in his work. In the Regency period he turned to the production of ornate cast candelabra in the neo-rococo style. (Koopman)

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### **Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)**

Traditionally, a charger is a large platter or plate, usually circular or oval, used for serving meat. Today, a charger plate is larger than a dinner plate but smaller than a platter. A charger plate is used as a decorative base setting for which other dinnerware is placed on top of during formal occasions. They are merely decorative, and are not meant to come in direct contact with food. At a formal dinner, the charger plate is placed at each setting and is generally removed after the first course, when the main entrée is served. Chargers provide an elegant way to serve multiple course meals, where each course is served in its own separate bowl or plate and placed on top of the charger. Charges also protect the table and tablecloth from becoming dirty during service. (Birmingham Museum and Webstaurant.com)

The partnership of Philip Rundell and John Bridge, started in London towards the end of the eighteenth century, went on to become the greatest firm of goldsmiths, jewelers and medalists of the age. Its stable of distinguished artists was the driving force in the adoption of a new imperial style in English silver. (Royal Goldsmiths)

By the early 19th century, the immense wealth of Britain’s richest citizens enabled them to patronise the luxury trades of coach-builders, cabinet-makers and silversmiths. The Prince Regent (Later George IV) and his aristocratic contemporaries set the style of what became known as the Regency period. The most prestigious firm of London goldsmiths of the age, Rundell, Bridge & Rundell supplied silver at the

forefront of fashion. Their large design studio included important artists such as John Flaxman and Jean-Jacques Boileau. (V&A and Paul Storr)

Known as “Oil” and “Vinegar”, Rundell and Bridge were of wildly contrasting personalities. While Rundell was an irascible taskmaster deemed to be the best judge of gemstones in London, the urbane John Bridge, described by a contemporary as the ‘complete courtier’, was the public face of the firm. He guided the Prince Regent (the Prince of Wales who later became George IV) in assembling a magnificent collection of gold and silver work which is now part of the Royal Collection. In fact the royal family was so pleased by his demeanor and the firm’s work that it was appointed ‘Jewelers and Goldsmiths to the King’. (Royal Goldsmiths)

Silver from this period is often referred to as “Regency Silver”. The Regency was a period when King George III was deemed unfit to rule and son ruled as his proxy as Prince Regent. However, the term Regency can refer to various stretches of time, some of which are longer than the decade of the formal Regency (1811-1820). The period from 1795 to 1837 is often described as the Regency Era and characterized by distinctive trends in British architecture, literature (Jane Austen), fashions, politics and culture. The Prince of Wales was one of the greatest patrons of the arts during this elegant period of great achievement in the fine arts. The era ended when Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837. (Wikipedia)

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### Current Mia Label Information (optional)

The London firm of Rundell, Bridge & Rundell was the undisputed tastemaker in Regency silver design. The first of eight versions made by Rundells over several years, this charger was probably made to entice orders from their prominent clients, numbering, among others, the Prince of Wales. The central image is ultimately based on a 16th century Venetian bronze relief, representing the apotheosis of Doge Sebastiano Venier, who helped to secure the Holy League’s victory in the Battle of Lepanto. In 1719, Bernard de Montfaucon published an engraving of the image in "L'Antiquité Expliquée", titling it "The Wedding of Peleus and Thetis." Rundell, Bridge & Rundell used Montfaucon's engraving as a model, certainly believing it to depict an episode of ancient mythology, as the present title indicates. However, the two figures in Renaissance Ottoman dress in the background have no place in such iconography, pointing back to the Venetian bronze relief as the original source.

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### Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

1. Various Wikipedia articles: Silver-gilt; Regency Era; Battle of Lepanto; Thetis
2. Style Guide, Regency Classicism, V&A: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/style-guide-regency-classicism/>
3. Webstaurant store: <https://www.webstaurantstore.com/article/13/what-is-a-charger-plate.html>
4. Charger, Birmingham Museum of Art: <https://artsbma.org/collection/charger-5/>
3. Paul Storr, V&A: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/network/paul-storr>
4. Royal Goldsmiths: The Art of Rundell & Bridge 1797-1843, by Christopher Hartop. ACC publishers. Book advertisement at <https://www.accpublishinggroup.com/us/store/pv/9780952432234/royal-goldsmiths/christopher-hartop-foreword-by-hrh-the-prince-of/>

5. William Pitts, Koopman Rare Art: <http://www.koopman.art/Pitts-William-DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=45&tabindex=44&artistid=4889>