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Exhibition note

by Genevieve Wheeler Brown

On “Gold in America: Artistry, Memory, Power” at the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

Opulent buckles that adorned the shoes of affluent early Americans, glowing coins crafted from ore newly mined in the Gold Rush, and a radiant eighteen-karat Gilded Age coffee service commissioned for one of America’s preeminent industrialist families—all these are among the many alluring examples of gold inspiring admiration and inviting discussion at the Yale University Art Gallery in “Gold in America.”

Described as “the first exhibition since 1963 to survey the role of gold in American art and culture,” “Gold in America” presents more than seventy works of gold drawn primarily from the gallery’s exemplary collection of American decorative arts as well as paintings, photography, and natural specimens belonging to the Yale Center for British Art, the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, and private collections.



Maker: Samuel Johnson, Engraver: Peter Rushton Maverick, Freedom Box for Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, 1784, Gold, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

Located in the museum's study gallery, an intimate aerie and teaching space, the exhibition spans four hundred years, leading us thematically through gold's artistic, economic, and emotional ubiquity in the American experience, from "Cycles of Life," with luxurious colonial examples including a child's gold rattle and whistle with coral teether (1761–65) by Daniel Christian Fueter (1720–85), to "Transmutation: Gold into Art" featuring modern creations by contemporary American goldsmiths, such as a lustrous eighteen-karat beaker from 1990 by Pat Flynn (born 1954).

Across the eras, we are transfixed by the luminosity of this material and the interpersonal connections brought to mind by these carefully selected objects. Organized by John Stuart Gordon, the gallery's Benjamin Attmore Hewitt Curator of American Decorative Arts, "Gold in America" is characterized by pieces executed with exacting, fine detail, many of which are small in size, inspiring close inspection. With a plentiful supply of magnifying glasses at the ready, we are invited to lean in and get personal with these precious items.



Simeon Soumaine, Skimmer Probably Owned by Hugh Hall 1720–30, Gold, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

Fewer than two hundred known articles of gold that are signed or marked by early American craftsmen exist to this day. Much of the world's gold has gone through countless forms, melted down and reconfigured time and time again. The gallery's collection of colonial and early Federal period American gold is the finest of any museum. And, remarkably, there used to be even more. In 1965, masked thieves stole a cache of Yale's American gold coin collection, high drama for a typically quiet academic community. Although the legendary "Brasher Doubloon" was later recovered, the circumstances surrounding the rest of the robbed currency remain to this day a numismatic mystery.

The core treasure featured in "Gold in America" is part of the gift of the Yale alumnus Francis P. Garvan, who beginning in 1930 donated over ten thousand objects to the gallery, which are known in his wife's honor as the Mabel Brady Garvan Collection. Highlights include the only known gold flatware to survive from colonial America. These seven diminutive gleaming gold spoons, together with a lyrically pierced tea "skimmer" were created in the 1720s by the New York silversmith Simeon Soumaine (*ca.* 1685–1750). Gold spoons from the period are uncommon enough in England, but American versions are exceptional.



Daniel Christian Fueter, Whistle and Bells for Mary Duane North, 1761–65, Gold and coral, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

Equally rare and brilliant is a famed gold "Freedom Box" commissioned by the Common Council

of the City of New York for Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben at a turning point in the city's history. Dated 1784, a momentous year with the recent evacuations of Loyalists and British troops, this oval-shaped box was a masterpiece of the New York silversmith Samuel Johnson (1726–96), who worked in his shop on Crown Street (later renamed Liberty Street) in lower Manhattan.

As dazzling as on the day it was first presented, this tribute conveying “freedom of the city” features animated engravings by Peter Rushton Maverick (1755–1811) of a wreath of flowers and swags encircling the lid, with at center a seal of the City of New York, which depicts an Anglo-Dutch trader and a Native American flanking a shield with beavers, barrels, and windmill sails.

Rare in both technique and example, this “Freedom Box” is distinguished by the earliest known “bright-cut” engraving in the United States, the decorative effect that came to define metalwork from the Federal period. This example was one of only two boxes known to have been made at the council's request, and it remains not only a historic and important work of art but also a tangible link to the Prussian-born patriot who shaped America's first army, assisted in the founding of the Society of the Cincinnati, and made New York State his final home.

Unique gold objects with interesting female connections are epitomized by a distinctive gold thimble (1730–40) created by Boston's leading silversmith, Jacob Hurd (1702–58), which belonged to the enterprising eighteenth-century Boston merchant Elizabeth Hubbart, whose maiden name is inscribed on its interior. Embellished with banding and foliate engravings, this thimble was the sumptuous sewing accessory of a financially independent widow who, we learn, specialized in selling fine imported laces, trimmings, and “sundry sorts of haberdashery” to the New England elite following the death of her husband in 1734. She later married John Franklin, a Chandler and the postmaster of Boston, a position facilitated by his younger brother Benjamin.



Jacob Hurd, Thimble, Gold, 1730–40, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

Accompanying this historical overview, interspersed among the American gold, is a selection of modern and contemporary fine art. These telling juxtapositions inform our understanding of gold's place in American life, as seen in the placement of a later gelatin silver print from the *Heiress* series (1938) by the noted Harlem Renaissance photographer James Van Der Zee (1886–1983) adjacent to the extravagant neoclassical eighteen-karat gold coffee service by Tiffany & Company (1910–11) made for Alice Belin du Pont. These pairings create dialogue across media, celebrating these objects as works of art and also encouraging their roles as vehicles for understanding

American culture as it evolved.

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