

## **GOLD**

Sir John Boardman

This is a week of celebration for the Bible Lands Museum, and the splendid display of its gold objects are a fitting tribute to its achievements and especially to the acumen of Elie Borowski, who, as I discovered when I came to try to catalogue the collection, had assembled a range of gold jewellery, especially the Etruscan, to rival any in a public museum. The objects are so small, their decoration so intricate, that it is not easy to take in at a glance. The way the objects have been set out for display here, and their accompanying material, make this much easier and we must congratulate Jessica Waller and her team on the exceptional display.

Gold is something special. It always has been and is likely always to be. As a material it is clean, pure, and cannot be tarnished. It can be found in many parts of the world but generally with difficulty and not in very large quantities. So it is reserved for expensive decoration, or as a means of exchange especially where the extremely valuable is being negotiated. For all ordinary purposes of life there is nothing more securely valuable. For its use in ancient art we have the collection here to admire for Eurasian antiquity. For a lecture such as this on gold I would not avoid art, but there is so much more of interest in this fascinating substance, in itself and what it stands for, that I must ask you to indulge me a rather rambling exploration of its character, history and uses. This is, then, a pot pourri of anecdotes and observations about the use of gold, which might provide a global setting for the specialist exhibition in the

Museum, and is also an entertaining, if rather erratic, exercise in recalling parts of the history of this remarkable substance.

You can dig it from rock, like the miner, the forty-niner and his daughter Clementine, in California. My daughter's partner was for a time a more recent prospector in California and has been the source for me of some illustration, which is highly evocative of the pain and difficulty involved in acquiring such sublime material. I suppose the archetypal figure from that California gold rush is the miner washing for gold, but also the song and verse, which it generated:

*Oh, I came from Salem city*

*With my washbowl on my knee.*

*I'm going to California*

*That gold dust for to see*

The start of that rush was by a mill and the whole affair generated a strange new type of folk art describing the event in various styles in verse, song and images of virtually folk art. It bred new independent communities, not always totally within the law.

There were several such gold rushes in the 19th century – as well as California there was the Klondike in Alaska and the Yukon – similar in Australia, Siberia, South Africa. Nowadays mining for gold has rather lost its glamour. In the Klondike it is now washed out of the mountain sides by massive machines, a very far cry from the forty-niner with his basin. But the objective remains the same.

All the earth seems to promise gold if you were lucky and worked hard enough. And this is partly true. We are told that in the earth's core there is 1.6 quadrillion tons of gold which, if plastered over the earth's surface, would produce a jacket half a metre in thickness – not a very useful statistic but thought-provoking.

Gold inevitably acquired its own mythology. When you pan for gold in rivers you can use a ram's fleece to catch the specks of gold in its hairs, like the one which was the original of the Golden Fleece story in Greek mythology, where the rivers were those of the Caucasus, and the fleece became divine, sought by Jason and procured for him by the unlucky Medea whom he jilted.

Or you might be lucky, or unlucky enough to have a golden touch, like King Midas, who soon found the disadvantage of having everything he touched turn to gold, even his food. He washed his hands in the Pactolus river in Lydia (west Turkey), which then became gold-bearing. I remember back in the 50s visiting it at Sardis and washing my hot face in it but without perceptible effect. And it was in Lydia that the first gold coinage was struck. That was real enough, the beginning of the root of all evil, if we believe the song. Then there was the Golden Ass, which in one story managed to excrete gold, but in the modern version merely poured gold from its ears.

Central Asia had more exotic stories about gold, and interestingly about its mining by animals and subsequent fortunes. Thus, one major source was said to be guarded by griffins (eagles with lion bodies), who were attacked by the one-eyed Arimasps – an early story illustrated in early Scytho-Greek art.

Farther south, along the old North-West Frontier, gold was said to be mined by ants, and was then stolen by men riding camels. The background to this story is far stranger. The so-called ants were in fact marmosets, animals about the size of small dogs, and the confusion a matter of misinterpreting names. And there was indeed an area which was gold-bearing in north India where the marmosets did dig their burrows, and the spoil did contain scraps of gold – and so the story developed. One Greek even found part of what he took to be one of the ants, a bone horned like a pick axe – most probably a fossil of the type well known in the area. He took it back to Greece to dedicate in a Greek temple.

But I do not want to bore you with more anecdotes about the uses and mythology of gold in antiquity, or even the ways in which it was employed by artists for rich patrons, which you can readily judge for yourselves in the collection here, nor with its history as money, or as the basis of money, as at Fort Knox, rather than reflect in a not too serious way (this is a celebration) on other aspects of its acquisition, and of the use and abuse of gold by man over the ages.

Gold can be beaten to a very fine sheet, even to as little as a millionth of an inch. This is why gilding objects can be so easy and give the impression even of solidity.

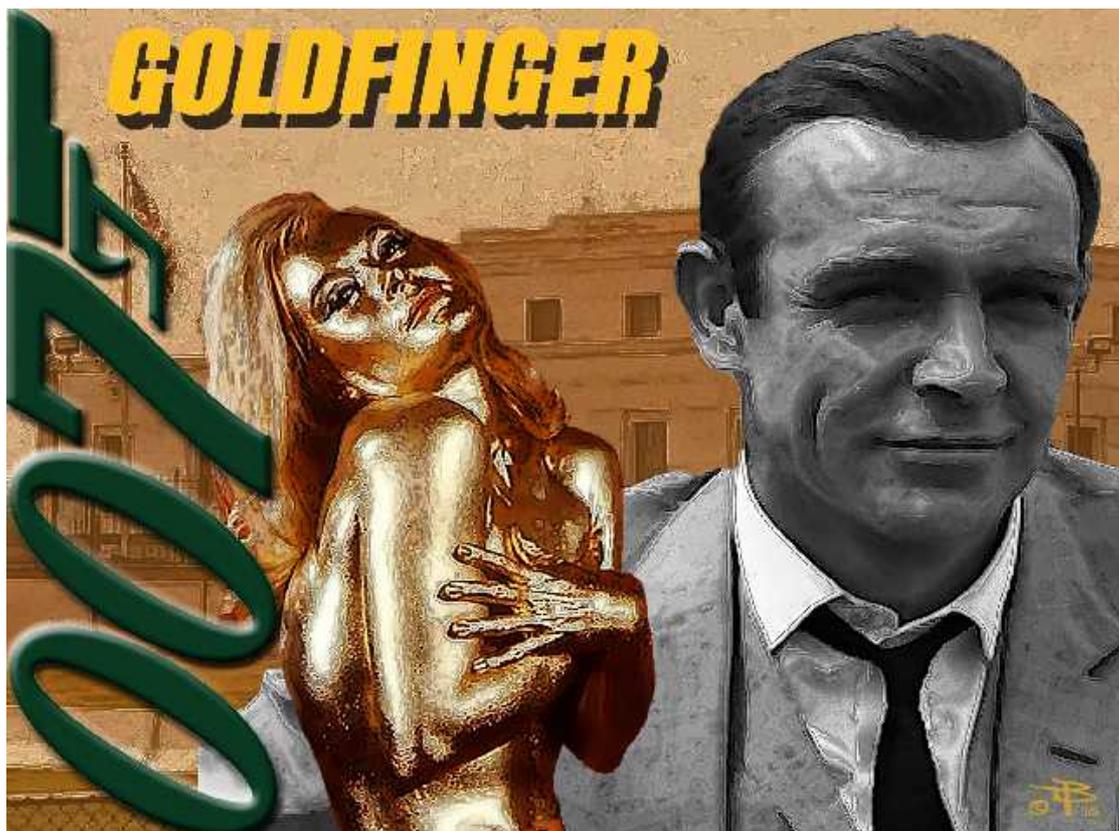
Solomon's temple was said to have been gilded and this is by no means impossible.

He had an annual income of 666 talents of gold and the Queen of Sheba sent him more. Quite remarkably large structures and furnishing have been so treated. For instance the golden temple at Amritsar. Interiors are of course even more susceptible to the treatment. A prime example is the Hermitage Palace in St Petersburg, with its golden rooms and its golden staircase (Figs. 1,2).



I visited it in the 70s when it was still Leningrad, and observed the columns being regilt with quite remarkably thick gold sheets. A more recent visit was the opportunity to observe its use also within the city's Maryinsky Theatre. In the New World perhaps Whistler's famous Peacock Room in Washington, is a good statement of what gilt hanging and decoration can do. And this is a style of decoration at which designers of the east, China and Japan, are very adept.

When it comes to the use of gold sheet and the human body the story is little different. In antiquity gold masks were generally made as separate sheets, and commonly as death masks intended to lend some element of immortality, but it is certainly possible to apply the gold directly to the skin. The Egyptian queen Hapsetshut was said to have put gold and silver on her face. And there is a modern Vietnamese beauty treatment, which does the same for the face. But the most famous recent example is of course fictional – in the film Goldfinger (Fig. 3) – where the gilding was supposed to be fatal, which is not entirely true.



Gold teeth, solid or gilt, hardly need comment, and from the same corpus of modern cinematic James Bond myth there is the man called Jaws. There was once a small sect which held that the Lord would reward men by turning their teeth into gold – a dubious advantage.

In fact gold is essentially an expression of life but it could indeed be used also as an instrument of death. When King Mithradates was as busy as he could be removing the Romans from Anatolia, he executed some of the noblemen by pouring molten gold down their throats; and not much later, when another Persian king had defeated the Romans and cut off the head of the general Crassus, using it as a stage prop in a production of Euripides play, the *Bacchae* (he had good taste), he then filled the head with molten gold to more than satisfy the Roman Crassus' legendary greed for money.

This rather 'down' story about the use of gold might remind us of other ways in which it has been deemed not totally an asset. Getting gold commonly involves greed and the greedy are often punished – thus with the story of king Midas. It can corrupt too. The Greek poet Pindar speaks of the mind of man devoured by gold. The Greek princess Danae, accepting a shower of gold in her lap, did not realise that it was Zeus who was embracing her.

It was and is quite easy to be deceived by appearances. In the physical world polished bronze can look like gold, as on our doorknockers, and in the raw state iron pyrites can be mistaken for gold. Perhaps the classic example of deceit lies in Thomas Gray's poem about how a favourite cat got drowned in a bowl of goldfishes, deceived by appearance:

*She stretched in vain to reach the prize;*

*What female heart can gold despise?*

*What cat's averse to fish?*

- and the moral then is obvious:

*From hence ye beauties, undeceived*

*Know one false step is ne'er retrieved*

*And be with caution bold.*

*Not all that tempts your wand'ring eyes*

*And heedless hearts is lawful prize,*

*Nor all that glisters, gold.*

The special gleaming quality of gold makes it of use when something particular needs singling out. This quality is shown very well in a view from the wreck of the Titanic, where the only things that seem to have survived and proclaim their survival are the golden. Amid the ruins a gold clock and parts of the gilt furniture shine out as if new.

This quality is often exploited. On the iron gates of Blenheim Palace, my neighbour, the application of heavy gold paint make quite clear the blazons amid the black ironwork (Fig. 4). But this raises also the question of imitating gold to which I will come later.



The versatility of gold is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in its use for dress of woven thread. Elizabeth Taylor's gold dress for her film as Cleopatra proved to be worth 200,000 dollars. No wonder that generations of mediaeval and even later alchemists devoted their lives and research to finding the substance which would turn base metal to gold. Gold can indeed be worked into the finest thread – there are good examples in the exhibition.

The word gold comes from Old English ga-lo, which means yellow. Gold is more than yellow, of course, having varying degrees of ruddiness as well, which are less apparent when it is well polished. It can be quite successfully counterfeited by

polished brass, a bronze and zinc alloy. But in a way we have allowed the colour yellow a prestige, which it hardly deserves and which seems to depend on the acknowledged quality of gold and its yellowish colour. The colour of the sun helps the illusion, no doubt.

We sublimate yellow flowers to being golden, in our gardens, and as with Wordsworth's golden daffodils. Sunflowers get the same treatment. A yellow bird can get to be labelled a goldfinch. A yellow motorbike or motorcar (Fig. 5) is aiming for the same prestige.



Gold is of course also edible and often used as a covering for sweetmeats in the east, but also in Europe – even gilt truffles and what is allegedly a gilt risotto.

There are several famous stories about the search for gold, not the raw material but the sheer wealth accumulated by others, either the raw material or worked objects of antiquity, a pursuit of the archaeologist who would, of course, never pretend that he was looking for gold rather than knowledge, but who is enthusiastic enough when he comes to find any. Then it may be either a matter of good luck, or deliberate search for worked objects either for their own sake or their sheer material value. Of the former the most famous, I imagine is that of Howard Carter at the tomb of Tutankhamen in Egypt: ‘At first I could see nothing, the blast of air escaping from the chamber causing the candle flame to flicker, but presently, as my eyes grew accustomed to the light, details of the room emerged slowly from the dust, strange animals, statues, and gold – everywhere the glint of gold’. And we are well familiar now with what he saw.

The covering of statues with gold was an ancient practice much copied in later classicising years. A fine example is the complex of statues in the gardens of Peterhof near St Petersburg (Fig. 6).



During the war their gilding was removed but the statues were more recently taken to the city for re- gilding, then to be driven through the city back to their home, which is a splendid outdoor display of gilt wealth. My neighbours at Blenheim Palace have recently been very busy too with gold plate and paint, to the benefit of the fountain beside the palace (Fig. 7) as well as the gates.



Another spectacular confrontation with gold was that of the Spaniards in America, where they were astounded by the wealth of gold available and not least by its application in works of unparalleled, to their classicised eyes, barbarity – so that they did not hesitate to render it down to the basic metal again, to ship home to a greedy royal household. The discovery of the New World, the Americas, became as much as anything a quest for the plentiful golden objects of the native pre-Columbian peoples, The sponsors of the exploration, in Portugal and Spain, had no illusions about what they hoped to gain by conquest: King Ferdinand told Columbus: ‘Get gold; humanely

if possible, but at all hazards - get gold'. As result very many golden objects, some of them remarkable works of art by any standards – were melted down and taken to Europe. From what was left we may judge their remarkable, even if to our eyes strange quality. There soon arose a story of a city of gold in Central America, perhaps a man dressed in gold – el Dorado – to be sought and robbed. For the Incas the gold was ‘the tears wept by the sun’. And at Cuzco, Pizarro found his greatest haul of gold loot – 700 plates to melt down.

Weighed gold as bullion or coinage meant that it could also be the bearer of messages of power. From the beginning, the sources of the coinage were in the west, as is made clear by inscription or figure motif. The east had coins too – the Chinese. The way the western coins could also serve as messages of power and success led to the widespread use of large coins - medallions – to celebrate similar successes or persons. The habit continues to the present day. Related, of course, are military medals. Through the Renaissance it was more often bronze than gold that was employed for such medallions, but lately is has regained its fashion, notably for commemorative pieces, but sometimes also pretending to be currency.

The first Israeli bullion was issued last year (Fig. 8).



I have no idea what currency and usage it has by now. The front of the 'coin' shows the Tower of David; the reverse the lion of Megiddo.

Comparable medallions, commonly not used as coinage, have appeared worldwide, generally commemorating particular events or persons. Most explain themselves: the celebration of the find of an exceptional nugget in Australia, emblazoned with the national animal; a rather more obvious record of Victory celebrating fine gold in the USA, with a nostalgic rustic scene; and personal celebration is commonplace for medals which are also currency, as for the Krugerrand

Laying up gold bars in the bank is an obvious way of hoarding wealth against the needs of some emergency. The Greeks could use their stocks more imaginatively, and the Athenian state gold that went to create the gold and ivory statue of Athena for the Parthenon, and figures of Victory in it, could readily be stripped off the figures when it was needed to help finance a war.

We probably all of us have our favourite golden objects – here are one or two of mine, if you allow me this diversion; a splendid gold lion with inlays from prehistoric Central Asia (Fig. 9) where both the metal and decorative stones were available;



a much later Central Asian group in which a rather Chinese-looking demon holds two divine horses, again inlaid with colourful stone (Fig. 10);



Cellini's famous salt in Vienna - when I first saw it I was as much impressed by its relatively small size as by the brilliant minor statuary in gold. And I cannot resist the

14th-century aquamanile in New York that shows the wise Aristotle, seduced by the wiles of Phyllis, sent to him by Alexander who was his pupil at the time, and who made him strip naked and carry her round the Academy garden on his back.

One special use of gold has a certain topicality, at least for my fellow countrymen, so I hope you will excuse me for using it as a final demonstration of gold as an enhancing medium in larger structures. Royal barges are traditionally decked out in gold.

Shakespeare describes Cleopatra's :

‘The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,  
Burned on the water; the poop was burnished gold.’

The best known royal barges of today seem to belong to Thailand, but in Britain this week we are celebrating our queen's Diamond Jubilee (Fig. 11),



and for her progress along the River Thames a new royal barge has been built, and its poop has received its due covering of beaten gold, to rival Cleopatra's.

If poets and sages are to be believed anything golden is likely to be beneficial and important. We speak of golden opportunities, the top prizes and medals for competition are usually golden; but Shakespeare reminds us that 'golden lads and girls all must, as chimney sweepers come to dust'. And gold is far more the symbol of life. When Hercules sought the home of the Hesperides who guarded the tree of life, to obtain its fruit, what he was given was, inevitably, a golden apple.