SAUCE FOR THE BOSTON GOOSE

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The whimsically shaped silver sauceboats of eighteenth-century origin recall the squat, round-bottomed hulls of ships a century or more earlier. They were variously called sauce cups and butter boats; the latter name refers to the melted butter that graced the tables of Boston and perhaps contributed to the rotundity of so many of Copley’s elderly sitters, among others Thomas Hancock, Hannah Hooper, Jeremiah Lee, and the not so elderly Paul Revere.

Few colonial sauceboats are seen today, and few were made, in comparison with the more familiar beakers, tankards, porringer, and tea sets; nor were they often mentioned in old lists of plate. Although Lady Macbeth’s banquet equipment is uncertain, her speech “the sauce to meat is ceremony; meeting were bare without it,” may have some significance here. In the colonies only the most affluent and socially ambitious included these luxurious utensils among their table furnishings, if we may judge by the ownership of three pairs now in the American Wing. One was made for the family of Governor Logan of Pennsylvania, who had been William Penn’s secretary; the second for a rich merchant and shipowner of Boston; and the third for the first Yankee millionaire, who made his fortune in the West Indian and China trade. Lesser folk perhaps agreed with Don Quixote that “there’s no sauce in the world like hunger.”

The pair of sauceboats given to the Museum this year by Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Varick Stout (ill. on the opposite page) are an early form, having the general characteristics of two made in London in 1726/7 by the famous Paul Lamerie. Our new acquisitions were marked by the equally famous Paul Revere, silversmith, coppersmith, and dentist, express rider and patriot, artillery officer and bellmaker. Apprenticed as a youth to his father, a Huguenot silversmith in Boston, young Paul continued to follow the character of his father’s work in the so-called Queen Anne style, in which the art of plain surfaces and graceful cyma curves reached perfection.

The confusion of certain of the patriot’s touch marks with those of his father has made their individual work often difficult to recognize. Following tradition, it has been assumed that Paul Revere Senior made one of these sauceboats (and marked it P. REVERE) for Daniel and Sarah Coney, prosperous citizens in Boston, and that his son, the patriot, later turned out its mate (and marked it REVERE) for the Coneys’ daughter Ruth when she married a Scotch sea captain, Mungo Mackay, in 1763. The supposedly earlier sauceboat has various refinements of line and detail (and two ounces more of silver in it than the other), differences perhaps to be laid to a master’s hand in one and an apprentice’s in the other. But, in spite of the fact that the standard books of silversmiths’ marks have for a long time assigned the mark P. REVERE in block letters to the senior craftsman, it does not appear on any silver having an actual history before 1754, the year of his death. Moreover, both pieces bear the same monogram, M R M, suggesting contemporary ownership. Our sauceboats, then, are probably the patriot’s work in his earliest and most robust style, prior to the Revolution.

Mungo Mackay was listed as “a mariner” when he arrived in Boston in 1760 at the age of twenty. During the years of the War he amassed a fortune as the owner of numerous privateers that brought into Boston rich enemy cargoes captured at sea. Privateering plunder was divided among the owner, officers, and crew, and, needless to
Pair of silver sauceboats made by Paul Revere in Boston about 1765. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Varick Stout, 1946. The marks on these two pieces are shown on the opposite page.

say, the profit and adventure involved proved an enormous attraction to youth with a taste for salt water. One of Mackay’s best known privateers, the Mifflin, was mounted with twenty guns and manned by a crew of one hundred.

Mackay’s fortune did not come entirely from privateering. On Long Wharf, that busy hive of commerce on the Boston waterfront, he owned two stores, where he pursued an active trade with the West Indies in molasses and sugar. These ingredients for rum were the basis for many Yankee fortunes, and a new, merchant aristocracy, founded on post-war prosperity, and profiteering too, grew up in Boston and supplanted the Tory regime, vanished with the War. With the Tories, however, had gone some of the best blood and talent in the colonies, no less than quantities of fine silver and other treasure made by the hands of native craftsmen.

Suitable to his new estate Mungo Mackay acquired a “mansion house” in the west end of Boston, on Cambridge Street, part of the property lately confiscated from William Bowes and
Richard Lechmere, two among the hundreds of wealthy loyalists who fled the patriots' wrath in 1776. For furnishing this house his inventory mentions a pianoforte, a large set of silk chairs, and French engravings purchased in Paris, and his name appears in Paul Revere’s account book in 1781 for “a pair of silver cans and marking twenty-four spoons.”

In his will, probated in 1811, Mackay devised “all the Plate, Household Furniture, Utensils of every sort and kind” to his wife, Ruth. Few of his thirteen children survived him to receive an inheritance, but an adopted daughter, Sally Hunt, was remembered generously. Although our sauceboats were not listed in the inventory attached to the will, they were heirlooms of his descendants until a decade ago.

Another pair of sauceboats (p. 71), lent this year by Mrs. Robert Peabody, are the most highly developed ones in the rococo style by Paul Revere. They can be dated accurately from an entry in his account book for the Derby’s silver on April 10, 1783: “Pair Butte: Boats Wt. 24.11.”

Since then, time has taken a toll of 10⅞ pennyweight from their bulk—but nothing from their value. Both are inscribed E H E D 1761, for Elias Hasket and Elizabeth (Crowninshield) Derby, who were married on that date. The sauceboats were used in their famous house in Salem, “more like a palace than the house of an American merchant,” which was designed and executed by Samuel McIntire after studies by Bulfinch. Its elaborate and only surviving mantel came to the Museum this summer. Hardly finished in 1799, when both Mr. and Mrs. Derby died, the mansion, too large and pretentious for other owners, was demolished in 1815. The furnishings were scattered by inheritance and sale, but these sauceboats have been kept in the family from the day they left Revere’s shop in 1783.

The writer is indebted to Kathryn C. Buhler of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and John Marshall Phillips of the Yale University Art Gallery, who met with him in Boston for a survey of the silver of Paul Revere, Senior and Junior, and its marks. The reattribution of the Reveres’ marks was made at that time.

Engraving from the Recueil de planches sur les sciences et les arts, edited by Diderot and Alembert. Paris, 1762-1777