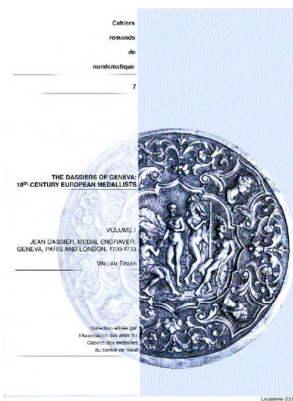


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Book review page 60.

William Eisler. *The Dassiers of Geneva: Eighteenth-Century European Medallists*. Vol. 1, *Jean Dassier, Medal Engraver: Geneva, Paris, and London, 1700-1733*. Vol. 2, *Dassier and Sons: An Artistic Enterprise in Geneva, Switzerland, and Europe, 1733-1759*. Cahiers romands de numismatique 7 and 8. Lausanne: Association des amis du Cabinet des medailles du canton de Vaud et le Musee d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, 2002 and 2005. ISBN no. 2-940094-05-5 (vol. 1), 2-940094-06-3 (vol. 2).



The Dassiers of Geneva, especially Jean Dassier (1676-1763) and his son Jacques-Antoine (1715-1759), were among the most important and prolific medalists of the eighteenth century. Their contributions to medallic design and production have been marginalized in part due to our limited understanding of their careers and the paucity of published documents about them. The only extended essays to focus on Jean and Jacques-Antoine's lives were written between 1772 and 1774, by Gottlieb Emanuel von Haller and Johann Füssli, based on a 1771 manuscript by Dassier's sons Jean II and Antoine. Forrer's skeletal description and checklist has remained the standard resource on them, but he freely admitted that "there is no complete catalogue of Dassier's work" (1:513). Eisler's two-volume, long-overdue study is the first monograph on the Dassiers and will be the standard reference on their work for the foreseeable future.

Jean Dassier initially trained under his father Domaine, chief engraver at the Geneva Mint, then in Paris under Jean Mauger and Joseph Roettiers. Returning to Geneva, Jean assisted Domaine at the mint for several years and, following his father's death in 1719, he became chief engraver there until his death in 1763. More than numismatic engravers or designers, Domaine and Jean were quite wealthy and played key roles in the design, construction, implementation, and legislation of screw presses in Geneva. As mint-masters they held a virtual monopoly over that technology and thus over the Genevan luxury decorative-arts market of the early decades of the eighteenth century.

Eisler's first volume and several chapters of the second examine Jean Dassier's work in medals and related decorative arts: the artist's association with the Genevan luxury-

goods industry, the “Fabrique,” is documented here for the first time. Dassier produced at least twenty exquisitely cut dies—frequently allegorical compositions based on Roman mythology—for watch cases, watch faces, and snuff boxes early in his career. In 1717, he reissued Jérôme Roussel’s sixty medals on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Undeterred by the tepid success of that series, in 1723 and 1724 he designed and struck over seventy medals of illustrious men associated with the reign of King Louis XIV. These latter medals brought him international acclaim, and he followed that triumph with a series depicting religious reformers and theologians, totaling over thirty medals. Dassier sojourned to England in 1728 and was offered a position at the Royal Mint. He declined the offer, but three years later he produced an enormously successful series of thirty-five medals of British sovereigns from William I to George II in bronze, gold, and silver; these were complemented by a smaller series depicting British worthies including Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, John Milton, John Locke, and Isaac Newton. At various times in the 1720s, 1730s, and 1740s, Dassier executed medals of Bernese dignitaries and, following the example of Louis XIV’s *Histoire Métallique*, produced an analogous medallion history of Geneva between 1734 and 1749. Dassier also designed most of the coinage for Geneva between 1711 and 1763.

The second volume continues to explore the career of Jean Dassier, then focuses on the work of Jean Dassier’s son, Jacques-Antoine, and collaborative efforts between the two (and, to a lesser extent, Jean’s son Antoine). Jacques-Antoine received early tutelage from his father, but moved to Paris in 1732 to study under Thomas Germain. In 1737, he began unofficial studies at the French Academy in Rome (as a Protestant, he was ineligible for the Prix de Rome). His earliest known medal, depicting Pope Clement XII, resulted from an audience with the pontiff at that time. Upon returning to Geneva, Jacques-Antoine immediately set out for England, where he was assistant engraver at the Royal Mint in London from 1741 to 1745; he produced more than twenty medals of notable British personalities during that decade, including Alexander Pope, King George II, and various nobles. Also in the 1740s, Jacques-Antoine collaborated with his father on a series of more than sixty medals concerning the history and personalities of the Roman Republic. His best works come from the 1750s, and include the famous medal of Montesquieu from 1753. Beginning in 1756, he worked at the mint in St. Petersburg and also was employed at the St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Art. Jacques-Antoine had been groomed to assume the mantle of his father’s atelier, and he enjoyed enormous success in the final years of his life. His untimely death in 1759 dealt a devastating blow to Jean’s hopes for a protracted Genevan dynasty.

The Dassier family was important to the diffusion and dissemination of style in eighteenth-century Europe. The Dassiers were not innovators, but they were savvy, efficient, ambitious, and prolific designers and die-cutters for hundreds of medals, coins, and other luxury items. Raised-rim borders, inevitably derived from Jean Warin, surround able, perfunctory portraits, with reverses that are often repetitive and simple. Their extended series rely formally (if not functionally) on the massively self-indulgent medals commissioned by the Sun King. With the possible exception of Jacques-Antoine’s later work, Dassier medals are not among the best in the history of medals (indeed, they are not even mentioned in Mark Jones’s survey *The Art of the Medal*). But perhaps more than any other medalists of the eighteenth century, the Dassier family integrated cutting-edge technologies and political acumen with a keen understanding of the market for medals and the decorative arts.

Eisler’s ambitious study redresses the rather surprising lacuna in our knowledge of the

family and its artistic milieu. Both volumes are profusely illustrated with hundreds of reproductions, including the original dies and puncheons held in Geneva. Enlargements, exquisite color plates, and numerous illustrations of engravings, drawings, paintings, and related medals complement a well-documented text. Eisler cites a wide assortment of sources to confirm his findings and bolster his arguments: tax records, letters, notarial entries, inventories, contracts, excerpts from earlier biographies (Füssli, Haller), and contemporaneous commentaries. The author frequently includes the full texts of documents, such as Roussel's 1711 description of the *Metamorphoses* (1:40-41) and Jacques-Antoine's 1756 contract with the Russian Imperial court (2:368-369). When Eisler revises the date of a series or attribution, his reasons are delineated clearly and often are based on documentary evidence. Arranged chronologically, the material will prove invaluable to students of medals, portraiture, and eighteenth-century style, while Eisler's fluid prose remains accessible to lay readers.

Each chapter is a discrete entity focused on a specific group of medals: a contextual essay precedes a catalogue of those medals followed by illustrations, and each chapter's catalogue has its own numbering system (citations will have to include the volume number, page number, and item number). The plates do not include identifying information, nor do they follow the same pagination as the text, catalogue, or catalogue illustrations; a list at the beginning of each volume redirects the reader to the appropriate catalogue number. Several early objects are not illustrated, including nos. 1, 3, 6, and 25 in the first volume. At the very least, they should have been included as figures. Essays often begin as though they immediately follow the previous chapter, when in fact twenty or more pages of catalogue entries and illustrations separate them, and the absence of paragraph indentations complicates an otherwise clear text. And while the illustrations generally are quite good, especially the color plates, many black-and-white plates are blurry and indistinct (e.g., vol. 1, Plates 5-6).

The minor problems outlined above are primarily organizational and aesthetic in nature, and fortunately they do not obscure an exceptional publication. *The Dassiers of Geneva* is rich in primary and secondary sources, and sheds much-needed light on the atelier of a significant medal-making dynasty. Eisler is to be applauded for collecting such an impressive array of documents and visual materials to illuminate the family, its contributions, and the social context of their medals. Not only will these two volumes serve as the authoritative source on the Dassiers, they may well rescue the family from the purgatory of relative obscurity.

—Arne R. Flaten