

The Dunstable Swan



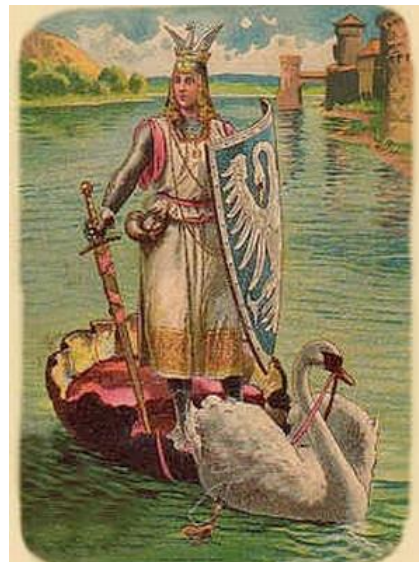
N.B.: Information from the Facebook page of Maurizia Onofri and from Wikipedia.

The Dunstable Swan Jewel is a brooch made of gold and enamel in the form of a swan, produced in England or France c. 1400 and presently exposed in the Room 40 of the British Museum. Excavated in 1965 in the Dunstable Friary, the experts presume that it is the heraldic symbol granted by an authoritative figure to one of his/her supporters. The Lancaster king Henry IV, who reigned 1399-1413, acquired the symbol of the swan when he married Mary de Bohun in 1380, but the most probable candidate is his son, the future King Henry V of England, then Prince of Wales since 1399.

The Swan is a rare example of medieval white enamel "en ronde bosse", recently developed and particularly fashionable at the time. In this technique, they covered gold almost entirely in enamel. It is inevitable to compare the Swan Jewel to the stag-shaped brooches of King Richard III.

The Jewel has the form a Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*) with a crown-shaped gold collar at the neck, decorated with six fleurs-de-lis. Attached to the crown is a gold chain. The swan is 3.2 cm high and 2.5 cm tall, the chain is 8.2 cm long. The body of the swan consists of white enamel, the eyes of black enamel; of the latter remain some traces on the feet. Little fragments of pink or red enamel have survived on the beak.

There might be a connection between the symbol of the swan and the Arthurian cycles and the medieval "chansons de geste". Many nobles increased their prestige by claiming an ancestry from the mysterious Swan Knight, titular character in a medieval legend, who appeared on a swan-shaped boat to defend and save a damsel under the condition that she did not ask his name. In the German Arthurian cycle, the name of the Swan Knight is Lohengrin and he is the son of Parsifal, a knight of King Arthur's Round Table, famous for his quest for the Holy Grail. The famous composer Richard Wagner adapted this account in his opera Lohengrin in 1848.



On the left: a jewel dated about 1490, witnessing the success of the symbol of the swan as a sign of noble ancestry. On the right: an illustration of the Swan Knight / Lohengrin.