

Room 16

English

Enamels in the Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, enamelling was one of the main techniques used to decorate gold and silver work. Enamel consists of powdered glass, coloured using metal oxides (cobalt, copper, iron, etc.) and usually rendered opaque. Applied on top of metal (gold, silver or copper), it becomes liquid when fired and solidifies onto the metal when it cools down. Either opaque or translucent, enamels, which were an ideal tool for decoration or narration, were extraordinarily popular in the Middle Ages, due to their brilliance and colours. Almost all enamelling techniques were invented or developed in medieval times.

The rise of champlevé enamels in the Romanesque era

The oldest technique, pre-dating the Middle Ages, is cloisonné enamelling, used in the Byzantine empire and in the West during the early Middle Ages. The enamel is applied in troughs delineated by thin strips of gold soldered to a thin metal plate, often made of gold.

At the start of the 12th century, a less expensive technique developed in the West: champlevé enamelling, already known since antiquity. It consists in placing enamel in troughs (or “champs”) carved into a relatively thick metal plate, generally copper; the parts left over (non-enamelled) are gilded with mercury. This technique enjoyed great success, leading to the blossoming of Romanesque enamelling, which had two main centres.

The Southern centre

People began to experiment with champlevé enamels at the start of the 12th century in Conques, at the time of the abbotship of Boniface. The technique then spread throughout Northern Spain and South-Western France, with Silos and Limoges becoming major centres.

Produced in either a Spanish or Limousin workshop, the *Christ in Majesty* binding plate (A. Cl. 13070 - case 11), the counterpart of which *The Crucifixion*, (fig. 1) is in Madrid, is a rare southern example of the combination of champlevé and cloisonné enamelling. Romanesque through the front-on position of Christ with stylised drapery filling the mandorla (almond-shape), which symbolizes the universe, but also through the vividness of the symbols of the evangelists, confined to the quoins (corners) by virtue of the “loi du cadre” (dictating that forms must fit the frame), the format of this work is reminiscent of certain Romanesque sculpted bas-reliefs (fig. 2).

The Northern centre

Champlevé enamels also developed from a centre concentrated in the Meuse and Rhine regions and extending to Saxony, England and Champagne. Dated circa 1160-1170, the plaque depicting *Elijah and the widow of Sarepta* (B. Cl. 23823 - case 10), with the cool palette characteristic

of northern enamels, probably belonged to one of these typological crosses from the Meuse region i.e linking together episodes from the Old and New Testaments (fig. 3): the crossed ends of wood are here a prefiguration of Christ’s cross. The set of enamelled plaques and nimbi (C. Cl. 14673, Cl. 17709, Cl. 23529, Cl. 23535 - case 10), elements of large broken up shrines, demonstrates the combination of champlevé and cloisonné techniques typical of Rhine-Meuse enamels from 1180-1200. The reliquary plate of *The Crucifixion* (D. Cl. 13068 - case 10), produced in Hildesheim, presents its separate figures (the Virgin, the Church, Christ, the Synagogue, the Disciple, the donor monk) on a midnight blue background constellated with gold dots, common in Lower Saxony enamels.

The work of Limoges

Known in texts as the “Work of Limoges” (*Opus lemovicense*) from 1169 onwards, the work produced by Limousin workshops, the earliest accounts of which date back to the 2nd quarter of the 12th century, spread throughout Europe, promoted by the decision of the Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215 to authorise the use of champlevé enamel for sacred vessels. The relatively modest price of the materials, the brilliance of the colours, the narrative verve and the abundance and diversity of the objects produced contributed to the success of Limousin enamels.

Abundant and diversified works

In addition to religious works – either modest or luxurious – including numerous reliquary-shrines (shrine of the Three Kings, E. Cl. 23822 - case 12) and liturgical objects such as pyxes (boxes to contain the Eucharistic host), crosses, holy book bindings, Eucharistic doves, etc. a range of secular objects were also produced. The secular or courtly décor of certain items, candlesticks, gemellions (twin basins for washing the hands: F. Cl. 954 - case 23), does not exclude a liturgical use. Numerous non-enamelled gilded copper objects were also produced by Limousin workshops, such as the sconce groups which seem to be elements of *The Flagellation* and *The Last Supper* altarpieces (G. Cl. 942, Cl. 973 - case 20).



A. Cl. 13070 - case 11



(fig. 1) Plaque,
The Crucifixion, binding
cover, Madrid, Instituto de
Valencia de Don Juan



(fig. 2) Bas-relief
12th century, Toulouse,
Saint-Sernin, ambulatory.



(fig. 3) Typological cross,
Mosan workshop, circa
1160-1170, Brussels, Musées
royaux d'Art et d'Histoire.

1077
Founding of the Order of Grandmont

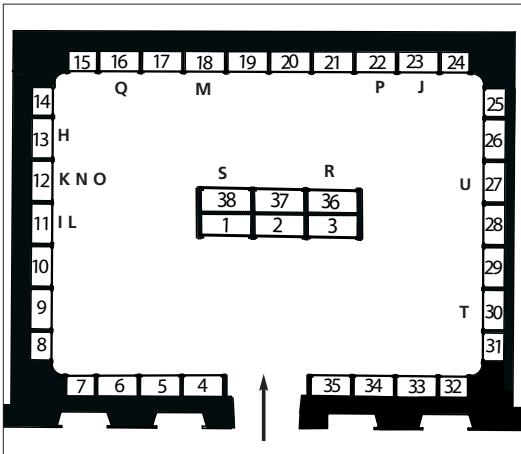
1107-after 1121
Boniface, Abbot of Conques

1169
First mention of the “Work of Limoges” in texts

1173
Canonisation of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, murdered in 1170

1189
Canonisation of Stephen of Muret, founder of Grandmont

1215
Fourth Council of the Lateran



In order to reduce production costs and satisfy a broad clientele, the Limousin workshops were capable of mass production, as was the case for Saint Thomas Becket shrines (**H. Cl. 22596, Cl. 23296 - case 13**), which are testimony to the rapid spread of worship of the Archbishop of Canterbury, assassinated in his cathedral in 1170 and canonised in 1173.

The Limoges workshops also created one-off objects for prestigious customer. *The Adoration of the Magi* and *Saint Stephen of Muret and his disciple Hugo Lacerta* (**I. Cl. 956 a and b - case 11**) plaques are the only remaining elements of the main altar at the priory church of the order of Grandmont, founded in 1077 by Stephen of Muret, a work probably produced just after the founder was canonised in 1189. The candlestick decorated with hunting and juggling scenes (**J. Cl. 23440 - case 23**) was probably produced in a milieu close to the Plantagenet court, another important customer of the Limousin workshops.

A technical and aesthetic evolution

The first works produced by the Limousin workshops depicted enamelled figures on a golden, smooth or vermiculated – decorated with thin foliage – background (**K. Cl. 18310 - case 12**). Around 1180-1190, a technique that was easier to implement and therefore more suitable for mass production, was developed: on an enamelled background, the figures are kept separate, engraved and gilded and often have heads applied in relief. This new technique, employed for the Baby Jesus on *The Adoration of the Magi* plaque (**L. Cl. 956 b - case 11**), became widespread during the first part of the 13th century (*Large Saint Faustus shrine*, **M. Cl. 2826 - case 18**), with the exception of an archaic movement that continued to use the original technique: *Reliquary of Saint Francis of Assisi* (circa 1228-1230, **N. LO AD 81 - case 12**), *Bonneval cross* (circa 1225-1235, **O. Cl. 22888 - case 12**).

The second half of the 13th century witnessed an increase in the production of stereotyped basic sconce figures ("Doll" shrine, **P. Cl. 14766 - case 22**), and a deterioration in the quality of the work. At the start of the 14th century it became less prolific with a primarily local clientele.

Stylistically and aesthetically speaking, the "Work of Limoges" reflects the evolution from Romanesque art to Gothic art. The magnificent *Christ the King, crucified* (**Q. Cl. 23671 - case 16**) marks the meeting point of these two styles: it is still a Romanesque Christ, glorious and triumphant in death, but with the knees bent, the head tilted and the modelling of the torso indicating a more naturalist style and the emergence of the Gothic image of the suffering Christ.

The transition between the 13th and 14th centuries and the emergence of sophisticated techniques

In the 13th-14th centuries, at a time when gothic goldsmithing work was blossoming, Paris asserted itself as the European capital of precious arts, alongside other centres such as Florence, Sienna, Avignon or Prague.

Plique enamels

Around 1300, Parisian goldsmiths revived the taste for cloisonné enamel on gold, with the invention of "plique enamels" (a term that may mean "applique" or "complicated"). The museum's six bezels (**R. Cl. 21386, Cl. 21387, Cl. 23411 a, b, c, d - case 36**), which were probably sewn onto clothing, set a great example to this technique. Very sophisticated, these involved a whole ornamental repertory of trefoils, hearts and circles, separated by fine gold divisions and filled with blue, red and white opaque enamels, or transparent enamel allowing the underlying gold to shine through. These enamelled plates may be the work of the most celebrated Parisian designer of plique enamels, Guillaume Julien, goldsmith to King Philip the Fair.

Translucent enamels on basse-taille

The technique of translucent enamels on basse-taille, invented by the goldsmiths of Sienna at the end of the 13th century, was adopted in Paris from the start of the 14th century. It consists of applying translucent enamels to a silver plate (sometimes gold), engraved and chased in bas-relief (a "basse-taille"). Difficult to apply (since the enamels are not clearly separated by divisions), this delicate technique leads to superb transparency and light effects. Intended, like the previous type, for wealthy customers, kings, aristocrats and rich churches, it led to the production of luxurious objects, such as the *Hanging reliquary of Saint Geneviève* (**S. Cl. 23314 - case 38**), made in Paris around 1380. In the 14th and 15th centuries, chalices, reliquaries and crosses, especially in Italy and Catalonia, were decorated with plaques of translucent enamel: *Reliquary-monstrance* from Sienna dating from 1331 (**T. Cl. 9190 - case 30**), *Barcelona cross* (**U. Cl. 22585 - case 27**).

At the end of the 15th century in Limoges, there was a re-emergence of products combining copper and enamel, but in a new form: painted enamels (often in the form of pictures). These gave the Limousin workshops renewed prosperity in the 16th century. In addition to the few early examples displayed in room 17, including *The Crucifixion* produced by Nardon Pénicaud (**V. Cl. 2232**), a rich collection of painted enamels can also be seen at the National Renaissance museum in Écouen.

Christine Descatoire, curator



H. Cl. 22596 - case 13



I. Cl. 956 a - case 11



J. Cl. 23440 - case 23



N. LO AD 81 - case 12



Q. Cl. 23671 - case 16



R. Cl. 21386, Cl. 21387, Cl. 23411abcd - case 36



T. Cl. 9190 - case 30



V. Cl. 2232

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