

## Room 19

English

# Religious goldsmithing

This room contains four rare and precious liturgical objects: an altarfront, a gospel book and its goldsmithed binding, an altarpiece, and a large cross. The latter is Byzantine, while the first three works, despite differences in terms of date and materials, share iconographic, technical and stylistic characteristics showing the artistic links between the different geographic areas of the German Empire.

### A Byzantine votive cross for Marian services (A)

This large processional cross, gilded silver on an iron core, was made in the Byzantine empire. On one side it is decorated with *repoussé*\* and gilded medallions and foliage, and on the other with gilded and incised nielloed\* figures. This type of cross appears to have been common in the Christian East, but very few examples remain today.

On the embossed\* side, the central medallion contains a bust of the Virgin in prayer; the medallion at the top depicts Christ and the one at the base Saint John the Baptist. Those on either side depict Archangels Michael and Gabriel. The iconography of this side of the cross is a variation on the Deisis, or supplication of Christ by two favoured intercessors, the Virgin and Saint John.

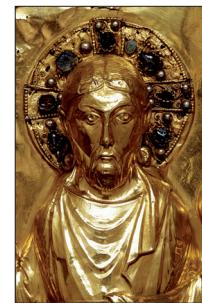
On the nielloed\* side, based on the Byzantine theme of the Virgin *hodigritria* ("she who shows the way", standing holding the Infant), placed on the centre of the cross, there is a succession of scenes from the Virgin's story, to be read in a clockwise direction, starting on the right: the Presentation in the Temple and the Virgin fed by an angel on the steps of the altar, two moments from the same episode related in the Gospel of James (apocryphal text dating from the 2nd century), then the Annunciation and the Crucifixion.

The Marial iconography of this cross, developed on both sides, suggests that it was intended for a church or chapel dedicated to the Virgin. The depiction of the donor, a monk named Kosmas, at the foot of the nielloed side, accompanied by a dedicatory inscription, reveals that this was a votive cross. The anomalies in the Greek inscriptions suggest that it was not made in Constantinople, the capital, but in a province of the Byzantine Empire, perhaps in Anatolia. By comparing it with painted works from the Byzantine Empire, this cross can be dated as belonging to the late 11<sup>th</sup> or early 12<sup>th</sup> century.

### The Basle Altarfront, an imperial commission (B)

Born in 962, the Ottoman Empire (founded by Osman I), the future Holy Roman Empire, had close links with Byzantium: commercial, diplomatic and matrimonial ones (as attested by the ivory plaque in room 10 with Osman II and Princess Theophano), but also artistic ones. Works from Byzantium and Greek artists circulated in the West: a Byzantine master may have helped to make this altarfront. Altarfronts, designed to decorate the front face of an altar table, were common in the High Middle Ages. A monumental work in gold and precious stones on oakwood, this altarfront consists of five arcades, set in a frame of foliage filled with birds and quadrupeds, topped by medallions depicting the four cardinal virtues: Prudence, Justice, Temperance, Courage. These arcades each house a standing figure, worked in *repoussé*\*. In the centre, Christ with his hand raised in blessing, is holding a globe with a chrism (Christ's monogram), alpha and omega. Four figures are turned towards him: on the left, Saint Benedict, the founder of the Benedictine order, with a book and a crozier, an abbey symbol; then the Archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. At Christ's feet, two minuscule figures lie prostrate in a sign of humility: these are the donors and commissioners of the work: Emperor Henry II and his wife, Empress Cunegonde.

This altarfront, made between 1015 and 1022, perhaps in Reichenau, Ratisbonne or Bamberg, but more probably in Fulda, was offered by the Emperor to Basle Cathedral. But its initial destination was almost certainly a Benedictine monastery, as suggested by the complex inscription glorifying Saint Benedict: perhaps the Abbey of Montecassino, near Rome, or the Abbey of Michelsberg, in Bamberg, founded by Henry II. Whilst it glorifies Christ and Saint Benedict, this work also celebrates the emperor who, despite his position of humility, is nonetheless associated with Christ and exalted as his representative on Earth. The work



B. Cl. 2350 (detail)



C. Cl. 13247 (detail)



D. Cl. 22653 (detail)

962

Imperial coronation of Osman I:  
foundation of the Ottoman Empire

1002-1024

Reign of Emperor Henry II

Early 12th century

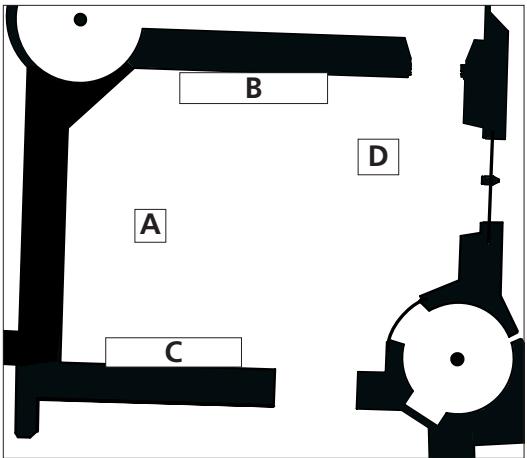
*Essay on various arts* by the monk,  
Theophilus

1130-1158

Wibald, Abbot of Stavelot  
and patron of the arts

1075-1129

Rupert of Deutz, monk  
and theologian



is therefore the result of commissioned art, serving a policy founded on the alliance between imperial power and the Church.

### The Pentecostal altarpiece, a masterpiece of Meuse region art (C)

In the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries, although altarfronts did not disappear completely, altarpieces began to develop, designed to be placed on the altar table, at the back of the altar (*retro tabula*). The example acquired by the museum in 1895 is made of repoussé\*, embossed\*, gilded copper on wood, adorned with enamels. It depicts the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Grouped in pairs in a space divided up by columns, the apostles occupy the earthly register while Christ rises in the tympanum, his hand raised in blessing, holding a book open at the inscription PAX VOBIS ("Peace be with you"). The rays of the Spirit reach down to the apostles, who express various emotions: surprise, meditation, submission...

The production of this altarpiece circa 1160-1170, is very probably linked to the prestigious Benedictine Abbey of Stavelot, a major artistic centre in the Meuse valley: it was probably made in and for this abbey. It is characteristic of the art of the Meuse region at its height, through its style impregnated with classical influences, through its technique – a cool palette of enamels on champlevé copper and the use of brown varnish – and through its iconography. The iconography is representative of the complex programmes elaborated by monks and theologians in the Liège region, such as Rupert of Deutz, based on strict correspondences between the Old and New Testaments. The seven columns allude both to the seven gifts from the Holy Spirit (wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord), and the seven pillars in the house of Wisdom described in the Book of Proverbs. The altarpiece is not simply a narration of the story of Pentecost, but also a symbolic depiction of the Church, the New Temple of Wisdom, of which the apostles, brought together by the descent of the Holy Spirit, are the pillars.

### The Novara Gospel Book binding (D)

The partially gilded silver binding plate, which dates from the first quarter of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, still decorates the manuscript, a gospel book, for which it was designed. Its damaged condition reveals the padding under certain repoussé figures designed to support them, a mixture of wax and stacked tile, exactly matching the recipe given by the Monk Theophilus, author of an *Essay on various arts*, the only practical account of this period that still remains today. The upper panel of the binding depicts the *Traditio legis et clavium*: Christ giving the keys to Peter and the Law to Paul; the lower panel is adorned with a badly damaged Crucifixion. These main scenes are framed by niches containing full-length or bust figures, angels and archangels, apostles and five bishops: Saint Ambrose of Milan, Saint Eusebius of Vercelli, Saint Syrus of Pavia, and Saints Gaudentius and Agabius, the first two bishops of Novara. Their presence suggests that the geographic origin of the work may be Northern Italy and, more specifically, the province of Novara: the work was almost certainly destined for Novara Cathedral. The central position of Saint Syrus, the first bishop of Pavia, alludes to the important role played by this city in the affairs of Novara.



B. Cl. 2350 (detail)



C. Cl. 13247 (detail)

### Common patterns

The Novara gospel book binding, chronologically situated between the Basle golden altarfront and the Stavelot altarpiece, has a few marked convergences with these works. In addition to their perfect execution, their overall balance and their remarkable use of repoussé, and despite the diversity of their materials (gold, silver, copper), all three works present stylistic and inconographic similarities. The figures of Christ (B, C, D), are, for instance, very alike: stylised drapery, clever modelling, a head in marked relief, hair separated at the front and drawn back behind the nape of the neck, crucifixion crown, studded with pearls and gemstones (reproduced in repoussé or in enamel). The drapes and faces of the characters are clearly suggestive of the Germanic area. The region was favourable to the development of goldsmithing: the highly productive period enjoyed by Fulda abbey and the commissions of Henry II in the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century were further supported by the blossoming of the Rhine and Meuse regions in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and extended to Northern Italy, as demonstrated by the Novara book binding.



D. Cl. 22653 (detail)

**Christine Descatoire, curator**

\* Embossed: relief décor obtained using a mould called a matrix.  
 \* Nielloed: coloured grey with niello, a metallic sulphide.  
 \* Repoussé : a technique in which reliefs are formed by hammering the metal on the reverse.

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