

# A LATE MEDIAEVAL PLIQUE-À-JOUR ENAMEL

By VERA K. OSTOIA

*Department of Mediaeval Art*

A Swiss early sixteenth-century plique-à-jour enamel plaque representing the family of the Virgin Mary has been given to the Museum by Robert Lehman. Very few mediaeval objects in this rare technique have been preserved, and these are almost exclusively small ornamental pieces. The outstanding early examples that survive are: the eight pinnacle points over the front of the eleventh-century Saint Stephen's crown in Hungary and the decorative insets in the early fifteenth-century Burgundian cup at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

The extreme fragility of plique-à-jour enamel plaques, which increases greatly with their size, is probably one reason for their scarcity, while the difficulties encountered in the process of making them may also account for it. The plaque given to the Museum, the first mediaeval piece of this kind to be acquired, is enclosed for protection between two glass panes, which could not be removed without danger to the enamel. The front of the plaque presents the uneven surface of painted enamels, while the reverse, as seen through the glass pane, appears to have a very thin coating of a transparent vitreous substance.

An amusing anecdote related by Benvenuto Cellini in his *Trattato dell'oreficeria* tells of a plique-à-jour enamel cup owned by King Francis I of France and of an interesting description of the technique that Cellini gave at the king's request. This description, he proudly adds, "greatly satisfied the generous king, who wanted to know the procedure." Cellini's information is so much the more valuable to us since this particular technique is not discussed in earlier manuals and since his pride in having been able to satisfy the king's curiosity regarding it shows that it was not widely known in his time. The standard books on enamels

barely mention the plique-à-jour technique. But it enjoyed a revival during the nineteenth century, when it was used chiefly for decorating jewelry, sometimes by a slightly altered method. There are some very beautiful examples of plique-à-jour jewelry by Lalique in the Metropolitan Museum.

Plique-à-jour enamel, sometimes called "cloisonné enamel à jour," differs from the regular translucent cloisonné enamel in having no backing and thus relying on the light passing through it to give the desired effect. It really is a kind of miniature window work. The technique, as described by Cellini and in modern manuals on enamel, is basically the same. The artist builds a shallow mold of the desired size and shape. If he is making a plaque, he uses narrow metal strips for the walls of the mold. He then usually lines the bottom of this mold with a thin sheet of gold, copper, or other metal or a sheet of mica; this serves as a temporary background for the enamel. Next he outlines the design with cloisons of fine gold, silver, or copper wires, attaching these lightly to the temporary background, and proceeds in the usual manner to fill the spaces with translucent enamel in powder form. The whole is then subjected to one or several firings.

After firing, the temporary background is removed either by dissolving the metal foils with acid or by rubbing off the adhering foil or mica with water or abrasives. The metal frame remains around the edge of the plaque, giving it support. The main difficulty of the process consists in making the enamel substance viscous enough and at the same time hard enough to adhere firmly to the cloisons and to hold the piece together. In the nineteenth century a solid metal plaque was often pierced and the spaces filled with enamel. To this type of plique-à-jour, of course, the defini-



*The family of the Virgin. Plique-à-jour enamel plaque, Swiss, XVI century. Height 10 $\frac{5}{8}$  inches. Gift of Robert Lehman, 1943*

tion “cloisonné à jour” cannot be applied.

The subject of the plaque, the family of the Virgin Mary, is known in German as “die Heilige Sippe,” or the Holy Kinship. Saint Anne is represented seated under a baldachin, holding the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child on her right knee; in her left hand there is an open book. At her left side stands Mary Salome, and at her right Mary Cleophas. Smaller figures of Saint John the Baptist and the children of the two Marys complete the group. Such an arrangement finds its explanation in Voragine’s *Golden Legend*: “Anne had three husbands, Joachim, Cleophas, and Salome; and of the first she had a daughter named Mary, the Mother of God, the which was given to Joseph in marriage, and she childed our

Lord Jesu Christ. And when Joachim was dead, she took Cleophas, the brother of Joseph, and had by him another daughter named Mary also, and she was married to Alpheus. And Alpheus her husband had by her four sons, that was James the Less, Joseph the Just, otherwise named Barsabee, Simon, and Jude. The second husband being dead, Anne married the third named Salome, and had by him another daughter which yet also was called Mary, and she was married to Zebedee. And this Mary had of Zebedee two sons, that is to wit, James the More, and John the Evangelist.”

The idea of the blood relationship of Christ and his immediate followers was very popular in the late Middle Ages, and it has been frequently represented in paintings, sculptures,

and prints throughout Central Europe, most frequently and elaborately in Germany. The subject did not last far beyond 1520 because the Church frowned on popular interpretation of the Scriptures.

In this late mediaeval period, religious representations no longer had the atmosphere of majestic aloofness proper to the Romanesque, and a feeling almost of familiarity appeared in some of the charming domestic scenes from the lives of the Holy Family and the saints. They were often shown in everyday occupations, and such subjects as Saint Anne teaching the young Virgin to read had a particular appeal.

The cult of the Virgin had grown to such an extent towards the end of the Middle Ages that her whole family was finally included in it. The tree of Jesse, based on the genealogy of Christ as given in Saint Matthew, was developed further, and Saint Anne became its symbol. Hymns and Rosaries were composed in her honor. She was chosen the patron saint of mothers of families. Artists began to represent her surrounded with a large family, including all the legendary husbands and relatives. Such groups agreed very well with the new tastes and ideals of the expanding middle class.

The Museum's plaque dates from a period known as "transitional," in which the highly animated late Gothic style began to absorb numerous details of the Italian Renaissance. The restless broken folds of the drapery and the naturalistic, almost ugly, facial types common in the art of northern Europe are here found side by side with the static composition and the architectural and ornamental details borrowed from south of the Alps. The influences of the Netherlands, France, Germany, as well as of Burgundy and Italy, were brought to Switzerland by various means, and were combined in the highly receptive art of the upper Rhine region.

Just as many earlier enamels were inspired by manuscript illuminations, the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century enamels often received their inspiration from woodcuts introduced about this time into printed books or published as separate sheets. In its composition and in certain details the Museum's plaque reminds one

very much of some of the fifteenth-century French and German woodcuts, while other details, especially the central group, betray an artist acquainted with French paintings and illuminations in Books of Hours. There is also some relation to the painted Limoges enamels of the early Pénicaud group. All these variations in style suggest an artist strongly influenced by French tradition, who worked with a German woodcut in front of him. Indeed, some of the details make us suspect very definitely that he was following a design not his own.

The size of the plaque, as well as its general appearance and even the scale of its colors, suggests the miniature stained-glass windows that were extremely popular in Switzerland around 1500. Small stained-glass panels were suitable for gifts and for use in private houses. They were cheaper than the large, monumental windows, and this may have been one of the reasons why they were preferred for a while. These small roundels or rectangular panels were usually decorated with armorial designs, but sometimes other subjects were represented. Miniature stained-glass panels were set into windows filled with plain or more often with crown glass. It is quite possible that the Museum's plaque was used in some similar way.

Plique-à-jour enamel of the type described here looks very much like stained glass when seen against daylight and forms a link between cloisonné enamel and stained glass. It would be interesting to follow up the relation, first of early stained glass to cloisonné enamel, their similarity in technique and in general appearance, and then, later, the use of translucent enamel in the plique-à-jour technique in imitation of stained-glass windows, the cloisons separating the colors being used almost like leads between pieces of stained glass. The monk Theophilus expressing his admiration for the colored glass in the windows of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople calls them the achievement of an art which "may beautify a structure and not repel the light of day and the rays of the sun." These words of Theophilus are strikingly similar to the description of plique-à-jour enamel in some old inventories: "translucent enamel through which the daylight is seen."