MEDIAEVAL ENAMELS
IN A NEW INSTALLATION

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It is a pleasure to be able to inform friends of the Museum that the finest of the mediaeval objects removed during the war are now reinstalled in new settings. The collection of enamels, unsurpassed in comprehensiveness and diversity, is shown in the corridor south of the Great Staircase and in a near-by gallery. These enamels date from the fourth to the sixteenth century, and almost all types and schools are represented. By far the greatest and most important part of the collection was given to the Museum by J. Pierpont Morgan through his son J. P. Morgan, but mention should also be made of the additions received in the gifts of Michael Friedsam, Benjamin Altman, and George Blumenthal. In the following pages some of the masterpieces given by Mr. Morgan are illustrated and briefly described.

Mediaeval enamels fall roughly into two categories, those made in the Byzantine empire or neighboring territories and those made in western Europe. Byzantine enamels were made according to the cloisonné technique, that is, by attaching thin metal partitions or cloisons to the gold or silver background, filling the areas between the cloisons with moistened enamel powder, and heating the resulting paste until it melted and fused with the base. In some cases the area to be enameled was depressed to form a shallow trough, so that when filled the surface of the enamel would be nearly level with the surrounding metal. After firing, the entire surface was carefully polished.

The medallions illustrated on the cover show the range of color and the miniature-like quality of Byzantine work. These enamels form part of a set which once decorated a silver-gilt icon of the Archangel Gabriel in the monastery of Djumati, Georgia (Caucasus). They were made in the eleventh century, probably in the imperial workshops in Constantinople, then sent to Georgia and there attached to the icon. Their subject is the Deesis, a group comprising Christ as Pantokrator (the Almighty) between the Virgin and Saint John the Baptist, who stretch out their arms to Him in supplication for mankind.

The earliest and rarest of the Byzantine enamels in the Museum’s collection is a silver-gilt reliquary of the True Cross with a representation of the Crucifixion on the lid (ill. opp.). The emerald green of the background is remarkably translucent. Light penetrates to the gold base and is reflected back with the effect of shallow water in sunlight. As the figures are made of more opaque enamel, they look solid and form a contrast with the shifting translucency of the background. Thus the qualities of Byzantine enamel at its best are impressively displayed.

This reliquary, it is said, was brought back from Constantinople by a crusader and once belonged to Pope Innocent IV (1243-1254). It remained in the Pope’s family (the Fieschi) until modern times, but the relic it contained was presented by Innocent to a church at Lavagna, the seat of the Fieschi family, on the Italian Riviera.

In western Europe during the Middle Ages enamels were usually made according to the champlevé technique, that is, by scooping out hollows in a metal base (usually copper) to hold the enamel paste, which was then fused to the base and polished. A number of European champlevé enamels, especially early pieces, show the influence of the cloisonné technique. Sometimes cloisons were introduced into the champlevé enamel, sometimes the divisions between the areas of the champlevé were made so thin as to suggest cloisons. In such works western craftsmen were probably copying Byzantine models.
The greatest centers of enameling in western Europe were the valley of the Moselle, the Rhineland (around Cologne), and Limoges. The Moselle valley was an important center for this art even in Gallo-Roman times. Mosan enamels (see ill. p. 234) are characterized by plain, gilded backgrounds, shrill, light colors—greens, yellows, and whites—and the outlining of parts of the figures in enamel.

Most European enamels of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were made in Limoges in south-central France. The colors of Limoges enamels are usually deep and cool, with a predominance of blues (cobalt, lapis, and turquoise) and a sparing use of reds, whites, and light greens for accent. The colors are not unlike those of French thirteenth-century stained-glass windows and remind one that both enamel and glass are vitreous materials.

In pieces from Limoges the enamel is sometimes confined to the figures, while the backgrounds are left free of ornament or filled with incised patterns; at other times this treatment of figures and backgrounds is reversed. An early use of sculpture with enamel is seen in Limoges pieces in which the heads of figures were cast in metal and applied with rivets to the plaques. Entire figures also were cast in relief, and eventually some approached sculpture in the round (see ill. p. 239). The simple background designs became increasingly rich and heavy.

Enamel was considered a semiprecious material and was therefore extensively used for the decoration of both ecclesiastical and secular objects. Sometimes statues were decorated with enamel and grave monuments were made in whole or in part of enameled plaques. Enamel was often used in combination with jewels and precious metals where a rich effect was particularly desired, as for example on reliquaries. Among the favorite subjects represented on such objects were Christ surrounded by the four symbols of the Evangelists, and rows of apostles and saints. Occasionally the symbols of the Evangelists were used without the central figure of Christ, as on the Spanish casket illustrated on page 235.

The medallion plaques illustrated on page 235 are said to have decorated a casket found in the church of Sainte Foy at Conques in southern France. Part of the casket was buried in the wall of the church, where it may have been hidden during the religious wars of the sixteenth century. An inscription on several of the plaques probably refers to the Boniface who was abbot of Conques in the first half of the twelfth century. The animals on these medallions are derived from Byzantine or Near Eastern models and are rendered in bold, contrasting colors.

Sometimes Limoges enamel plaques have curious marks on the backs. These, according to Stohlman, probably served both as guides in assembling the plaques and as signatures. In large ateliers such marks made it possible to group together in the proper order the plaques that were to be fastened to the wooden core of a particular casket or book cover. Stone masons and ivory carvers used marks in the same way.

After 1400 enamels began to imitate paintings. They gained a glossy brilliance and pleasing facility of composition, but lost forever the deep colors and ancient designs peculiar to the art.
The Baptism and the Crucifixion. Plaques. Mosan School (Godefroid de Claire?), about 1150-1175. Here the cloisonné and champlevé techniques are combined. Each plaque 4 inches high.
ABOVE: Two medallion plaques. French (School of Limoges), first half of the xii century. Diam. 3 3/8 inches. BELOW: Reliquary from Champagnat. Spanish (?), xii century. To what extent enameling was practiced in Spain is not fully known. Height 3 3/8 inches
Crucifix. French (School of Limoges), early 13th century. It was probably used in the service as both a processional cross and an altar cross. Height 7 7/8 inches
Dove and incense boat. French (School of Limoges), xiii century. The consecrated wafer of the Mass was sometimes kept in a dove suspended above the altar, possibly as an allusion to the Holy Spirit. The sculptural quality of the piece shown here is very fine. The incense used in the Mass and other services is carried in incense boats until placed in the censers.

Length: dove, 7½ inches; incense boat, 10½ inches
Reliquaries. French (School of Limoges), late XII-early XIII century. The tendril designs on these caskets are characteristic of one group of Limoges enamels. Height 4½ and 4¼ inches.
Saint James. French (School of Limoges), XIII century. From an altar frontal in the abbey of Grandmont. Height 11\(\frac{3}{8}\) inches