DECORATIVE PORTRAITS BY LÉONARD LIMOUSIN

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In the field of the decorative arts we must often concentrate our attention upon the work of the little-known or even anonymous masters and endeavor to delineate the outlines of a “style” belonging not only to an individual but to a generation and a country. Particular problems in the decorative arts can in this way lead to an understanding of the mind and taste of a bygone age that is quite unexpected. Hence it is that such studies in the highways and byways of the history of art so often result in rich and rewarding discoveries.

Let us take for example the painted enamels produced at Limoges from the last quarter of the fifteenth century until the end of the sixteenth. Although these pieces enjoyed an exceptional favor with nineteenth-century collectors it has been hard to determine by whom and where they were made. They have been appreciated above all for reasons of style. And it is according to their style that they have been given to several workshops and masters who remain merely as names in the history of art. Among those to be mentioned are the so-called atelier of Monvaerni, Nardon Penicaud, the Master of the Triptych of Louis XII, and Jean I and Jean II Penicaud. Their works represent well enough the transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Coming to the work of Léonard Limousin, who is the subject of the present article, we meet with a concrete person and enter definitely into the Renaissance. He is the best known of the enamlers. He has left many signed works, and much documented evidence has come down to us about his life and activity. His work as a portraitist, so often misunderstood, deserves particular attention, being an interesting chapter in the history of the French Renaissance.

Léonard began to work around 1530, first painting religious subjects, like other enamlers of his generation in Limoges, the Penicauds and Pierre Reymond. Two examples from a series of plaques representing the Passion, the Way to Calvary, and the Last Judgment, after engravings by Dürer, came to the Metropolitan Museum with the Bache collection. This series bears the date of 1533 and is possibly Léonard’s first work of importance. Even here, when he is still following the rather anonymous tradition of his craft, the brilliance of his technique and the elegance and freedom of his design already distinguished his style. Léonard, who was incidentally also a painter and engraver, went about 1535 to work at Fontainebleau. There he found Il Rosso, who had been called from Italy in 1530 by Francis I, and with him a whole workshop of Italian artists, like Primaticcio and Francesco Pellegrino, dispensing all the new charms of their imaginative and elegant style. And in the royal galleries, which were quickly becoming the spreading center of the French Renaissance, Léonard got acquainted with all the troubling sensitivity of Italian mannerism. He also found there all those “peintres et gens de métier” of Flemish education who had recently entered the “état des officiers domestiques”: François Clouet, the son of the famous Janet, Guillaume Boutelou, René Tibergeau, the two Le Manniers, and many others. Italy and Flanders met at Fontainebleau and in Paris with a strange harmony.

Under Francis I the fashion of the “portraits” was at its beginning. The new reign of Henry II and Catherine de’ Medici, which commenced in 1547, was to be the golden age of the “crayons.” From the collections of Chantilly, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the Louvre the portraits of all the French nobility of that time, of all those “seigneurs et dames illustres et galantes” who haunt the Memoirs of Brantôme, and many others come towards us.
Many of them appear in paintings by François Clouet and by Corneille de Lyon, who ran his busy workshop in Lyons from 1544 to 1574. The king and queen had their own artists attached to their houses, and so did the various princes of the crown; even the royal children had their painter. In this environment Léonard devoted his talent to enameled portraits and in 1548 received the title of “Emailleur et valet de chambre du Roy.” He had already produced a number of them during the first fifteen years of his career and seems to have made his reputation on them. Most of his enameled portraits belong, however, to the reigns of Henry II (1547-1559) and Charles IX (1560-1574).

These plaques excited the keenest interest of connoisseurs towards the middle of the nineteenth century. Collectors vied for them. In 1857 Lord Seymour exhibited for the first time five Limousin portraits from his collection, and in the great Loan Exhibition of South Kensington in 1862 twenty-four portraits were displayed. A catalogue of the portraits of Léonard Limousin compiled in 1897 by Bourdery and Lachenault evaluated the number of the existing pieces at about 130. No attempt, however, was made by scholars of that period towards an evaluation of the artistic significance of these portraits, if we except some short remarks by two French scholars, Étienne Moreau-Nelaton and Louis Dimier. But the former was more interested in drawings than in enamels, the latter was hostilely disposed towards every pre-classicist expression of art. Dispersed in private collections, only a few of these portraits are today in public museums. After the Louvre with its twelve important pieces and the Victoria and Albert Museum with its eight portraits the Metropolitan Museum of Art with its seven examples offers a unique opportunity in this country for studying Léonard’s work. Together with the rich collection of painted portraits on wood and canvas of the French sixteenth century in the Museum, these plaques give a complete picture of an important aspect of the Renaissance in France.

The piece which first of all attracts our attention is a circular portrait of Francis I (p. 97), the first royal patron of Léonard, from the Bache collection. It is in its original frame of black enamel. To those who are acquainted with the portraits of the king, the youthful and elegant sovereign of the Louvre or the gorgeous and proud equestrian portrait of the Uffizi, this face will appear strikingly familiar. It is, in fact, derived from the same drawing that was used for the Uffizi panel, a drawing in the Musée Condé at Chantilly, made about 1540. It may possibly owe something to the hand of François Clouet, and it was apparently intended to be used as a model for various representations of the king. The face of Francis I, strangely gleaming against the opaque black background, suggests the hot-blooded character of the man. The brown fur cape and the white embroidered “chemisette” make a sober frame for the medallion-like face. As a comparison with the Chantilly drawing shows, Léonard reduced the elements of the face to almost abstract, independent values, treated in stiff and stylized relief technique and accentuated by reddish strokes. Instead of attempting to transfer the delicate shading and what is still visible of the sensitiveness of the drawing into the medium of enamel, he contented himself with delineating the features of his subject as a strongly decorative silhouette. Particularly striking is the elongation of the undulating moustache and the treatment of the beard as a dark compact surface without any attempt at expressing the softness of the hair.

This reduction of the “sfumato” drawings of Clouet and his school to a linear decorative conception appears also in our second portrait, an oval plaque, somewhat larger than the first, the portrait of an unknown lady, signed by Léonard with his characteristic mark LL. Her very pale face stands forth from the deep blue ground, the light brown hair is interwoven with a checkered green and pink ribbon, and the dress, of a delicate gray, is embroidered with gold and trimmed with a turquoise band strewn with precious stones, which are simulated by drops of gold covered with translucent enamel. The frame, also in black enamel decorated with a delicate gilt pattern and bejeweled with flowers, makes an agreeable whole with the rest
Unknown lady, by Léonard Limousin. Something of the brilliance of Fontainebleau is preserved in this charming example of Léonard's elegant and fanciful style. Gift of V. Everit Macy, 1928
LEFT: Portrait of an unknown lady, once believed to be Marguerite of Navarre, by Léonard Limousin. Dated 1550. The Michael Friedsam Collection, 1931. RIGHT: Pencil portrait of Marguerite of Navarre (1492-1549), the beloved sister of Francis I. Musée Condé, Chantilly
of the portrait. Here again the face is firmly molded in very definite planes. The curve of the nose and the chin have a plastic solidity. The very delicate shading itself is determined not by any naturalistic aim or technique but by consistent stylization. The early design of the dress, the elaborate coiffure, and the jewel above the forehead—a fashion, incidentally, introduced by "labelle Ferronière," the mistress of Francis I—place this portrait in the 1540's, the period of the portrait of Francis I.

This firm and rather dry handling of the line also appears in a group of drawings, for the most part belonging to three albums in the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers in Paris, which contain the models of many portraits by Léonard. The linear, decorative quality of these drawings, so different from the general soft manner appearing in the typical portraits of this time and so close to the style of the enamels by Léonard, suggests the idea that many of them may be from his hand. In this respect they help us to understand the relationship between Léonard's style and the large mass of French sixteenth-century portraits in oil and crayon. And at first they seem to offer easy and abundant clues for the identification of the personages portrayed in the enamels. But if we attempt in this way to arrive at identifications we quickly come to realize how unreliable and even misleading is the evidence at hand. We wonder, indeed, how much has been preserved of the true physiognomy in the medium of enamel and to what extent the aim of the artist was to be naturalistically true. Many of these portraits are still incognito, others are fixed in iconographic stylization.

Thus, coming to our third plaque, we look in vain for a satisfactory identification of this small oval portrait in opaque enamel and gilt, a very charming piece which some scholars say, others deny, represents Marguerite of Navarre. The plaque, again signed LL, is dated 1550. The high ruffled collar of the lady is embroidered with a combination of letters, PXE, PME, or PNE which has been interpreted as Marguerite, Princess of Navarre. The hypothesis is tempting, but the resemblance of the features to those in numerous extant drawings of Marguerite is not convincing. Moreover we find that these drawings were undeniably the model for a portrait of Marguerite by Léonard, today in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Anyway the noble sadness of the likeness, perhaps in widow's weeds, with the black corsage and the opaque, almost black background form a striking contrast with the bejeweled lady of the other portrait. The only note of color is that of the cerulean, thoughtful eyes. A new delicacy of brushwork is visible here, something which makes the style of this enamel closer to the "crayons."

This evolution towards a softer style in the work of Léonard appears also in two other small rectangular plaques, likewise signed and dated 1550. Each of them portrays a gentleman. Here also we are not sure of the identity of the individuals, although they have in the past been
Henry d’Albret, King of Navarre and husband of Marguerite (1501-1555), by Léonard Limousin, after the sketch reproduced on the opposite page. Dated 1556. The Jules S. Bache Collection
tentatively described as two Huguenots, Claude Condinet and François de Maurel. In these pieces Léonard is much closer to the technique of the crayon and to the brushwork of the painter. The faces are sensitively treated, with a touch of sunburnt, warm color against the intense blue background. Both men are dressed in black with tiny white collars, a garb characteristic of the austere fashion of the reign of Henry II, and lean upon a band of bright green enamel. The way in which the beards of both and the white hair of the hatless gentleman are rendered is that of a draughtsman. But the greatest charm of these enamels is the effective distribution of the different areas of color upon the surface of the plaque. The sobriety of the colors, the deep black against the brilliant blue (Limoges blue), and the luminous faces are a pleasure for the eye.

These qualities are to be found at their best and with a touch of utter refinement in a very remarkable plaque from the Bache collection representing Henry d’Albret, King of Navarre. The plaque, signed and dated 1556, was made after a drawing in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris which bears the inscription “Henry Roy De navarre.” The enamel portrait was made one year after Henry’s death, possibly as a memorial. A porcelain-like pink colors the features of the king of Navarre, who is dressed in plain black and wears the order of Saint Michael and an elegant velvet cap with a white feather. A light beard, clear eyes, a nose delicately drawn are executed in a manner which again suggests the technique of the masters of the crayon.

A slightly rougher technique and a more accentuated stylization of design appear in our seventh and last plaque: a rectangular portrait of an unidentified man with a very blond moustache and a peculiar forked beard. The four-cornered velvet cap and the large black collar on the white undergarment would perhaps indicate a man of the church or of the law. Here the pictorial handling, the elegant line, and the distribution of colored surfaces produce a remarkable decorative effect. With the Henry d’Albret and this last piece we are dealing with the fully developed art of Léonard Limousin.

Comparing our enamel portraits with the average contemporary portraits in painting and drawing allows us perhaps to draw some conclusions about the character of the work of Léonard. Two diverse styles, the Italian mannerism of Primaticcio and Rosso on one hand, translated into a typically French style by Jean Cousin, and Flemish realism, represented chiefly by the Clouets and Corneille de Lyon, on the other, made up the artistic climate of this moment of the Renaissance at the court of France. Léonard, educated at Fontainebleau, very likely under the influence of the work of Jean Cousin (the few original engravings by him show striking similarities to Cousin’s work), resolved the problem of the “portraiture” in the only way he could—with his exceptional gift as decorator. Even when the stylization of the early portraits is later modified by the use of devices derived from the technique of the painter and the draughtsman, the balanced unity of his style is always maintained and the apparently rebellious medium of the enamel reduced to a decorative formula.

The misunderstanding of the highly decorative character of Léonard’s portraits induced nineteenth-century collectors to enclose them in frames. To conform to their naturalistic standards it was necessary to separate the portrait from its environment. But we know today that in the sixteenth century these portraits were set in the wooden paneling of small rooms, adding a purely decorative note to their walls. Catherine de’ Medici in her “cabinet des Emaux” had gathered during her lifetime “trente deux portraits d’environ ung pied de haut de divers princes, seigneurs et dames, enchassez pareillement dans le dict lambris,” as the inventory of her estate, made in 1589, tells us. These thirty-two portraits must have given this renaissance cabinet an exceptional atmosphere, most agreeable to the Florentine queen, who, remembering perhaps the frescoes of Ghirlandaio in Santa Maria Novella, had such a passion for portraits. The rich collection of drawings now in Chantilly once belonged to her, and hers was that unique Book of Hours entirely decorated with portraits of contemporaries, today in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. But she shared this
taste for the representations of the individual with the whole of her century. This was the age which admired the renowned collection of two hundred and forty portraits left by Paulus Jovius in Como in 1552 and which produced such encyclopedias of famous men as Guillaume de Rouille's *Promptuarium iconum hominum insignorum* (1553) and the impressive work of André Thévet, *Les Vrais Portraits et Vies des hommes illustres* (1584).

At this moment we may ask what "exact" portraiture could mean to those men who collected "portraits" of the patriarchs of the Bible and the fathers of the church to the same extent as those of their contemporaries. Was the portrait perhaps in many cases intended more as a spiritual presence than as a faithful likeness? If so, that could explain the establishment of a kind of fixed "iconography" such as we find for Henry II, Catherine de’Medici, or Henry d’Albret.

The development of the portrait in France has often been commented upon and related to the rise of the psychological studies and the interest in the individual so characteristic of the French mind. All the étude de caractères of French literature and philosophy has been seen to have had its beginning in the Clouet portraits. We do not doubt that this point of view is well founded. But when we look at our portraits in enamel we understand one thing more: that the Renaissance not only had such a love for individual features as to make collections and even "corpus" of portraits, but that, at the same time, the portrait was invested with so symbolic a character that it could be conceived of as a subject for mere decoration. The idea of the decorative portrait was not unnatural to Renaissance minds. An example of it is the work of Léonard Limousin.

Additional material on the subject of this article can be found in Bourdery and Lachenaud, *Léonard Limousin, Peintre de portraits* (1897), E. Moreau-Nélaton, *Chantilly, Crayons français du XVIe siècle* (1910) and *Les Clouets et leur émus* (1924), and L. Dimier, *La Peinture de portrait en France* (1924).

*Portrait of an unknown man, by Léonard Limousin. The Jules S. Bache Collection*