



FONDATION
GANDUR
POUR L'ART



© Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Geneva. Photographer: Thierry Ollivier

Incense boat

Limoges, 13th century

Partially gilt and champlevé enamelled copper

8 x 21 x 9.5 cm

FGA-AD-OBJ-0085

Provenance

Ruiz collection, Madrid, until 1949

Ernest Brummer collection, New York, until 1979

Galerie Koller, Zurich, 17 October 1979, lot 234

Sotheby's, London, 6 July 2017, lot 7

Bibliography

Unpublished



A liturgical function

This small, mandorla-shaped vessel in champlevé enamelled copper is particularly remarkable for its two-part lid. Separated by a central hinge, both sides are decorated with foliate scrolls in copper reserved on an enamelled ground, with an openwork knob on each half in the form of a coiled dragon. This ornamentation, half-vegetal, half-fantastic, extends along the two upcurving copper handles, slightly flattened at their ends, each evoking a reptile's head. Covered by this lid and set on a low foot, the body has an oblong shape reminiscent of a ship's hull, hence the name "navicula" (or "navette" from the French), meaning a small ship, also used to refer to this type of object.



Fig. 1b © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : Thierry Ollivier



Fig. 1c © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : Thierry Ollivier

Part of the liturgical furniture, this vessel was used to store grains of incense. This resin was commonly burned in a censer to produce smoke, wafted by priests during services to bless the altar, the Gospels, the elements of the Eucharist, as well as the candles, palm leaves or the faithful. Yet the presence of an openwork motif on the lid of this particular incense boat suggests that the grains could also be burned directly in the vessel itself. Few such examples are still in existence today, due in particular to frequent and sometimes no doubt rather incautious handling. These objects nonetheless had a powerful symbolic dimension, if we are to believe the interpretation proposed by Guillaume Durand, Bishop of Mende in the 13th century, who assimilated the incense to a symbol of prayer and the censor to a metaphor of the body of Christ¹. These enamelled incense boats were part of ecclesiastical treasuries, being owned from the 13th century onwards by many churches in Limousin, but also on a wider scale throughout Europe, in the same way as Eucharistic doves, pyxides

¹ *L'Œuvre de Limoges. Émaux limousins du Moyen Âge*, cat. N° 131, p. 373.



or candle spikes, also with enamelled decoration, of which the FGA has two beautiful examples (*Figs. 2 and 3*).



Fig. 2: Pyxis, 2nd quarter of the 13th century, Limoges (FGA-AD-OBJ-0078) © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Geneva. Photographer: André Longchamp

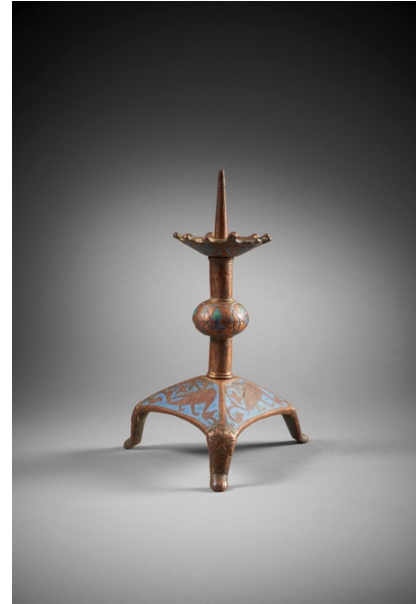


Fig. 3: Candle spike, last quarter of the 12th century, Limoges (FGA-AD-OBJ-0081) © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Geneva. Photographer: Thierry Ollivier

Chisel, glass and fire

By its etymology, the very term “enamel” tells us that this technique belongs to the field of ceramics and glass, known in French as the “fire arts”. A modern form of the Old French *esmal*, from the Late Latin *smaltum*, it derives from the same Indo-European root as the Old High German word *smelzan*, which gave the verb *schmelzen* (to smelt)². The art of enamelling shows how craftsmen and those commissioning their work were fascinated by the charms of a vitreous material that can, depending on whether or not an opacifier is added, imitate *pietre dure* or precious stones. This “artificial stone” consists of a crystalline mixture with a silica and lead oxide base (the flux), to which metal oxides are added to give colour and, optionally, tin oxide, which has opacifying properties. This blend, combined in powder form, is vitrified and acquires its final colour by being fired at a high temperature.

The rich palette of yellow, dark blue, turquoise, green, red and white found on this small incense boat thus employs the main oxides used in Limoges in the 13th century: antimony, cobalt, copper and tin.



Fig. 4 © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : Thierry Ollivier

² GAUTHIER, 1973, p. 17.



The enamelled decoration itself is based on a fusion of metal and colour that is used to fill the coloured compartments separated by metallic elements. The latter are either added, generally by means of soldering – known then as "cloisonné" enamelling – or made by removing material with a chisel or gouging tool – referred to as "champlevé" enamelling – as is the case here.



The loss of enamel from one of the floral motifs on the lid of the FGA's incense boat helps us, paradoxically, to clearly understand the technique used, by revealing the raised lines of the copper material around the cells initially intended to contain the enamel. In the base of the depressions thus created, it is even possible to see uneven surfaces created by tool marks, which helped to enhance adhesion of the enamel.

Fig. 5 © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : Thierry Ollivier

Applied with the aid of a quill, spatula or metal nib³, the enamel thus fills the cells, with all the colours being added together prior to the firing, thus demanding a particularly high level of dexterity when they are juxtaposed, as, in this instance, on the yellow, green and red palmettes. After firing (sometimes followed by a second repeat application and firing), the enamelled surface is polished with a hard stone to make it level with the metal reserves. Then follows the engraving of details on the exposed metal parts with the aid of a small chasing tool: the grooves of the palmettes, the dragons' wings and the frieze decorating the vessel's body. The latter also bears numerous traces of gilding, especially under the low foot, on top of the body and at the base of the dragons, implying that all the metal parts were originally gilded, notably to protect the copper from oxidation.

13th century Limoges work

While evidence exists of the use of enamelling as an ornamental technique in Byzantium in the 6th century⁴, it first spread to Europe in the 10th century, culminating in the astonishing Rheno-Mosan flowering of the 11th and 12th centuries. Its presence in Aquitaine in the form of champlevé can be observed, for its part, at Sainte-Foy-de-Conques, before it found in Limoges a particularly fertile ground for it to come to fruition from the 12th century onwards. *Opus lemovicense*, a term that

³ ARMINJON and BILIMOFF, 1998, p. 183.

⁴ Ibid.



appeared in the late 1160s⁵, benefited in Limousin's episcopal city, in fact, from a strong demand from wealthy religious and monastic institutions, due to the proximity of the Abbeys of Saint Martial and Grandmont. The marriage between Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry Plantagenet, Henry II of England, further increased the two abbeys' prosperity, as well as that of the whole region. Yet the dazzling development of *champlevé* enamel workshops in the last third of the 12th century also resulted from a demand that came from well beyond the Duchy of Aquitaine.

The precious, graphic and colourful aesthetic qualities of Limoges work largely explain this success, as well as its solidity and the relatively moderate cost of materials and fabrication. From 1200 onwards and during the following decades, it would actually be mass produced. Though a form of standardisation did occur, with the use of design models for the applied figures affixed to chasses, for example, the subtlety of the variants observed "prohibits recourse to the notion of series"⁶. The study of the few incense boats still in existence well reflects this phenomenon. While all are of the same type, innumerable subtle details differentiate them. They vary not only in terms of decoration, but also in the shape of the handles and as to whether or not it is possible to open both sections of the lid, or just one, as in this instance.



Fig. 6 © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographe : Thierry Ollivier

At first glance, the FGA's incense boat thus bears a certain resemblance to the one acquired in 1998 by the Louvre Museum (inv. OA 11974), which has a similar arrangement of a tripartite decoration of foliate scrolls in reserve on a blue ground, ending in palmettes coloured red, blue, green and yellow. Yet the shape of these palmettes differs, having three lobes as opposed to five on the one owned by the FGA. This particular characteristic invites a comparison between the Louvre's object and two

⁵ DRAKE BOEHM, Barbara, "*Opus lemovicense* : la diffusion des émaux limousins", in *L'Œuvre de Limoges. Émaux limousins du Moyen Âge*, 1995, p. 40.

⁶ TABURET-DELAHAYE, 2011, p. 47.



tabernacles, both dating from around 1200: one from the church in La Voûte-Chilhac (Haute-Loire), today at the Bargello Museum in Florence, and one from Tüssling Castle, now kept at the Bayerisches National Museum in Munich⁷. The presence on them of glass knobs, use of which became rare during the 13th century, would appear to confirm such a date. In comparison, the FGA's piece appears to be later. It has more in common with the incense boat belonging to the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dijon (inv. CA T 1264), which also combines tripartite decoration of foliate scrolls with palmettes and openwork dragons. This object has been cautiously dated to the 13th century; it being much more difficult to situate examples after 1215 in a precise chronological context.

From church to collector's cabinet

In the 19th century, as a result of the neo-medieval romantic trend, Gothic enamel pieces from Limoges were diverted from their original liturgical functions and became collectible items, much sought after by museums and private collectors alike. They supplied a large European and American market until the mid-20th century⁸. The FGA's incense boat was thus part of the Ruiz collection in Madrid until 1949, before being acquired by Ernest Brummer, co-founder in 1909, along with his brother Joseph, of one of the most important galleries of medieval art in Paris. When Joseph moved to New York in 1914, Ernest continued to manage the Paris branch until 1940, when he joined his brother on the other side of the Atlantic. The Brummer brothers were pivotal in assembling the Metropolitan Museum of Art's medieval collections, especially for The Cloisters⁹, while at the same time building up their own important individual collections. Joseph's was sold in New York in 1949, two years after his death, and Ernest's collection thirty years later, in Zurich, setting this small, enamelled incense boat off on a new trajectory which led, in 2017, to it joining the collection of Limoges work held by the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art.

Dr Fabienne Fravallo
Curator of the Decorative Arts Collection
Geneva, May 2019

⁷ TABURET-DELAHAYE, 2002, p. 89; *L'Œuvre de Limoges. Émaux limousins du Moyen Âge*, 1995, p. 250, fig. 71a and p. 252, fig. 71b.

⁸ DRAKE BOEHM, Barbara, "Le goût des Américains pour l'Œuvre de Limoges aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles", in GABORIT-CHOPIN and TIXIER (dir.), 2011, pp. 123-138.

⁹ BRENNAN, 2015.



General Bibliography

L'Œuvre de Limoges. Émaux limousins du Moyen Âge, exhib. cat. [Paris, Musée du Louvre, 23.10.1995-22.01.1996; New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 4.03-16.06.1996], Paris, Éd. de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1995.

ARMINJON, Catherine and BILIMOFF, Michèle, *L'art du métal : vocabulaire technique*, Paris, Éd. du patrimoine – Imprimerie nationale, 1998.

BRENNAN, Christine E., "The Brummer Gallery and the business of art", *Journal of the History of Collections*, vol. 27, N° 3, 2015, pp. 455-468.

GABORIT-CHOPIN, Danielle and TIXIER, Frédéric (dir.), *L'Œuvre de Limoges et sa diffusion. Trésors, objets, collections*, Rennes, PUR, 2011.

GAUTHIER, Marie-Madeleine (dir.), *Émaux méridionaux : catalogue international de l'Œuvre de Limoges*. vol. 2: *L'apogée 1190-1215*, Paris, éditions du CTHS, 2011.

GAUTHIER, Marie-Madeleine, *Émaux du Moyen Âge occidental*, Fribourg, Office du Livre, 1973.

TABURET-DELAHAYE, Élisabeth, "Acquisitions", *Revue du Louvre*, N° 2, April 2002, p. 89.

TABURET-DELAHAYE, Élisabeth, "L'Œuvre de Limoges : art industriel ou orfèvrerie précieuse ?", in Michele TOMASI (dir.) in collaboration with Sabine UTZ, *L'art multiplié. Production de masse, en série, pour le marché dans les arts entre Moyen Âge et Renaissance*, Rome, Viella, 2011, pp. 43-54.