Casket with putti decoration

c. 1550
Limoges
Painted enamel, gilt highlights and engraved gilded copper on wooden substructure
11.5 x 19 x 13 cm
“IE SUIS ARDIR VALIAN : ARDIS“ in gold on lower left enamel panel on back; “LE DIEU BACUS : AP[…] S : VALIA“ in gold on lower enamel panel on left side; “L[ou J]E […] SANS SUIS.“ in gold on lower enamel panel on right side
FGA-AD-OBJ-0058

Provenance
Canning family Collection
Alfred de Rothschild Collection
Almina, Countess of Carnarvon Collection
Christie’s London, 19 May 1925, lot 184
Mr Webster Collection, UK
Christie’s London, 18 April 1989, lot 72
Christie’s London, 9 February 2012, lot 636
This small rectangular casket with trapezoidal lid is decorated with twelve painted enamel panels, on which are represented naked or clothed putti, set in a landscape reduced to a strip of green grass under a blue sky.

On the main faces of the base and lid, divided vertically into two parts by gilded and engraved copper plates, the putti are occupied in playing music, dancing or handling weapons.
The shorter sides are more clearly triumphal in character, with, on the one hand, a chariot drawn by putti, and on the other, an enthroned putto. These two scenes are placed below classical style portraits within medallions from which emanate arabesques, an ensemble of motifs from the Renaissance formal lexicon, as are the pilasters with Corinthian capitals at the corners, terminating in feet in the form of busts of naked women.

The casket belonging to the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art is one of a set of around twenty similar examples, representing "children's games" accompanied by mottos or proverbs in gold lettering, attributed since the 19th century to Colin Nouailher. This attribution has been questioned by Sophie Baratte who, on the basis of a comparison of the style of these caskets with that of works signed by the enameller, proposes, more reasonably, to remain with the notion of anonymity.

1 Higgott 2011, pp. 220-231.
2 Barratte 2000, pp. 62 and 83-84.
True jewels in themselves, these caskets were probably intended to hold precious objects, given as gifts for engagements, weddings, or births. The representation of multitudes of putti amusing themselves playing war games could thus be better understood in this context, calling on a newborn son to acquire courage and valour, as the partially-erased inscriptions suggest.

The provenance of this casket, as detailed in the sales catalogue description, is particularly prestigious³: it might have passed through the hands of François I of France, Cardinal Wolsey (d. 1530), Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn and finally Elizabeth, Countess of Worcester (d. 1565). Established on the basis of a document published in 1781 in Treadway Nash's *Collections for the History of Worcestershire*, such a provenance is however incompatible with the stylistic dating of the casket⁴. It is possible that the author of this document, dated 1684, Thomas Abington, invented this genealogy, which does however contain other interesting information: the names of the subsequent owners, and the handing down of the casket to him by inheritance, from girl to girl, a process then reinstated at the end of the 18th century within the Canning family.

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for the Fondation Gandur pour l’Art
March 2020

This text was written for the catalogue of the Decorative Arts collection of the Fondation Gandur pour l’Art to be published in autumn 2020 under the direction of Fabienne Fravalo, curator of the collection, co-edited by the Fondation Gandur pour l’Art, Geneva and 5 Continents éditions, Milan.

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⁴ The original document on parchment in the Worcestershire archives used by Treadway Nash was rediscovered by Mrs. Sara Fox, who sent us the transcript of it in 2015.
Bibliography


