



Kasteel van Loppem

STICHTING JEAN VAN CALOEN

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Acquisitions for the Castle

Champlevé Enamel: 13th Century Religious Art from Limoges and Central Italy

In the footsteps of Jean van Caloen

Loppem castle has an outstanding art collection focused mainly on mediaeval art (13th-16th century). This collection was created by Baron Jean van Caloen (1884-1972). He had inherited his passion for art from his grandmother, art lover Savina de Gourcy Serainchamps (1825-1912). Jean had the good sense to keep records of most of his purchases. His remaining notebooks and correspondence are a veritable treasure trove of information about his art purchases, teaching us things such as whom he purchased items from, where, when, etc. The price he paid can usually also be found. Various disciplines are represented in his collection, with the emphasis on wooden and stone sculptures, with or without their (partly preserved) original polychrome. It also includes fragments of retables, paintings on wooden panels, stained glass, drawings, prints, manuscripts, incunabula, ivory, metal and alabaster. One thing is missing, however, which is strange for a collector of mediaeval art: enamel, with its fascinating blaze of colour.

After the death of Jean van Caloen, his only child, Roland (1920-2014), himself a passionate collector of ethnic art and valuable book bindings, supplemented his father's collection with a few very specific purchases. These included two fabulous sculptures, *Saint George* by Jan Borman I and *Saint Domitian of Huy (also Maestricht or Tongres)* or *Saint Servatius* by Jan II or Pasquier Borman. When the 'Jean van Caloen Foundation' was established, it was both Jean and Roland's wish to not only open up the art collection to the public, but also to add to it if good opportunities to purchase items arose. It is with that wish in mind



Jean van Caloen (1884-1972), art collector and founder of the Jean van Caloen Foundation, named after him, around 1909

Three painted enamels of the Roman emperors Tiberius, Vespasian and Vitellius, by Jacques I Laudin, 2nd half 17th century



that the Board of the 'Jean van Caloen Foundation' has continued this policy.

In the spring of 2022, such an opportunity arose. A few exceptionally well-preserved champlevé enamels from Limoges and central Italy were put up for sale by the Antwerp antiques dealer Bernard Descheemaeker of *Works of Art*.¹ They were museum-quality articles from the 13th and early 14th century that would be both a wonderful addition and also add a certain extra allure to the Loppem collection. In the end, four items were purchased. They have been on display since the end of April as a magnificent tribute to Jean van Caloen, who died exactly 50 years ago.

Champlevé, cloisonné and painted enamel

Anyone with any familiarity with mediaeval art will associate the enamelling technique with the French city of Limoges (as well as the Prince-Bishopric of Liège and the Maasland region). The technique is far older, however: back in the time of the pharaohs in Egypt, as well as among the Romans and Celts, jewellery and other utensils were decorated with this delicate and colourful finish.

From the mid-12th to the 14th century, Limoges had numerous workshops where the jeweller-enamellers had mastered the techniques of cloisonné and champlevé.

Cloisonné enamel consists of a copper plate onto which fine copper threads are soldered, forming the lines of a composition. Each coloured piece of enamel is trapped between these 'cloisons' or partitions.

In **champlevé** enamel, such as the four items purchased, the jeweller engraves the lines of the composition into a copper plate that is 2 to 3.5 mm thick, using a metal stylus. The enameller then makes shallow troughs in the copper plate. These are filled with enamel using a spatula. Enamel is a glass paste obtained by pounding pigment and glass particles in a mortar and mixing them to a paste. Once the troughs on the copper plate are filled with this mixture, the entire thing goes into the kiln. The high temperature melts the granular enamel powder. Each colour has a different melting point, so each colour has to be fired separately, starting with the highest temperature (800° C) and then at gradually lower temperatures (to around 700° C). Melting the enamel reduces its volume compared to the amount of powder originally applied, so the enamel has to be topped up several times. It is clear that this is a difficult process, even more so because the more colours used, the more often the item has to be fired.

However, the process is still not complete. Once the enamel has cooled and hardened, the entire surface of the plaque is polished. The traces left by the files are sometimes visible even after eight hundred

years. If the client wishes, the plaque can then be engraved or embossed. Finally, it is gilded.

The contrast between the gilded copper and the often-used tints of blue and green, with a little white or red sometimes added here and there, is a particular feast for the eyes, both in the past and today.

Finally, there is **painted enamel** that dates from the 15th to 17th century, when both biblical scenes and portraits and secular and mythological scenes were created. This technique is almost exclusively a speciality of Limoges. The Renaissance emerges in the form of engravings and the French kings and their courts. In addition to polychrome images, there are also subjects rendered in grisaille.

Three medallions in those shades of grey were found in Jean van Caloen's library, representing the busts of Roman emperors in profile. These enamels are reminiscent of cameos, not only due to the subject, but also the contrast between the black background and the grisaille heads. These painted enamels are the work of Jacques I Laudin (1627-1695), a member of a productive family of Limoges enamellers, and they date from the second half of the 17th century, but they were fashioned after a series of prints dating from 1619 by Jacob II de Gheyn (around 1565-1629). This find was the reason for purchasing the mediaeval enamel. Below, the four items purchased are discussed; there are two fragments of processional crosses, a pyx and the plaque from a reliquary shrine.



Polychrome enamel depicting emperor Claudius, by Jacques I Laudin, 2nd half 17th century. Private collection

A very large corpus of Christ

(Limoges, 1225-1250, copper, polychrome champlevé enamel, engraved, gilded, h. 26.5 cm, w. 19.7 cm)

A processional cross is made of copper or silver, which may or may not be gilded, and consists of a crucifix placed at the top of a large staff for carrying it. It was carried in front of an archbishop as a mark of honour, but then the figure of Christ was turned towards the prelate.

Two parts of two different processional crosses were purchased by the 'Jean van Caloen Foundation'. The first is an ex-

ceptionally large corpus of Christ, 26.5 cm high, which is considerably bigger than other corpuses of Christ and thus would seem to indicate a processional cross rather than (smaller) altar crosses. But it is above all the perfect state of preservation that makes this item unique. There are several corpuses of Christ known on which the hands or part of the crown have broken off. That is not the case here, and even the gilding is largely intact. The crucified Christ clearly bears the influence of Romanesque art. This is apparent, for example, from the crown: not the crown of thorns, but the crown as a symbol of dignity, Christ as the King, the conqueror of death. The top of the finely worked crown bears a cross pattern in the middle. The breast and ribs of the Messiah are represented respectively by a thin, wavy, continuous line and parallel engraved lines. The arm muscles are brought out in the same way. And as was the norm in that period, the loincloth or *perizonium* is fairly long. It is buckled (in white enamel), covers the legs to the knees and continues along the sides of the legs. The draping is suggested with lines of blue enamel.

What is also striking, and typical of the Romanesque style, is that the feet are placed next to each other. It should certainly be noted that the beard on the face is very well groomed, but the eyes are especially remarkable. They have been made with two drops of blue glass. If you look at the figure of Christ from behind, holding it up to the light, you can look right through the eyes. As



Christ on the Cross (comes from a processional cross)
Copper, polychrome champlevé enamel, engraved, gilded
Limoges, 1225-1250.

stated, the characteristics discussed here clearly refer to the Romanesque style, although the curve of the body quietly betrays the arrival of the Gothic style in the s-shaped hip movement or *déhanchement*. We are still some way off here from the suffering Christ introduced by the mendicant orders in the 14th century, with his crown of thorns, smaller loincloth and above all lots of blood and pathos.

Provenance:

Private collection, France, 2011; on 01/02/2011, Angoulême, Hôtel des Ventes; private collection Spain, 2011-2018

Plaque with Christ in Majesty

(Central Italy, around 1300, copper, polychrome champlevé enamel, gilded, h. 8.1 cm, w. 8.1 cm)

This four-lobed plaque comes from the rear of a processional cross. It was attached to the place where the arms of the cross meet. The depiction shows Christ in Majesty (*Majestas Domini*), sitting on a cushion, placed on a throne. He is looking sternly ahead, with his left hand resting on the Book of Life (Apoc. 20,12), as he gives a blessing. He is presented here as a divine figure, hence the nimbus behind his head. The nimbus or halo appears in Christian art from the second half of the 4th century onward and was initially used only for God, but later also for the saints. The divine aspect is also evoked by the mandorla. This almond-shaped wreath originated in the East in the same period as the halo. The entire composition is flanked by two angels, with the one on the right holding a text banderole. The scaling of Christ and the angels emphasises his divinity.



Christ in Majesty (plaque from the rear of a processional cross)
Copper, polychrome champlevé enamel, engraved, gilded
Central Italy, around 1300

The depiction of the *Christ in Majesty* is often surrounded by four living beings: the eagle, the winged lion, the winged ox and the winged man, representing the evangelists John, Mark, Luke and Matthew respectively. They do not appear on this plaque, but perhaps decorated the ends of the arms of the cross on individual plaques. The colour combination consists of dark blue, turquoise and red. The artfully draped robe is largely gilded, again emphasising Christ's divine aspect. The architecture of the throne and the fabric of the cushion are also rendered in great detail. At the beginning of the 20th century, this plaque was still considered to be Rhineland work until great similarities were discovered with a circular plaque of the bust of Christ, kept in the treasury of Anagni Cathedral (Frosinone province, Lazio region). Since then, it has been assumed that it was produced in central Italy.²



Pyx

(Limoges, 1225-1250, copper, polychrome champlevé enamel, engraved, gilded, h. 7,2 cm, diam. 6.4 cm)

A pyx is a small, cylinder-shaped vessel with a lid, usually made of precious metal. In contrast to the ciborium, which is far larger, the pyx does not have a stem. This vessel is used to hold consecrated hosts or to take them to the ill or dying.

This beautiful example has been decorated all the way around with a succession of medallions, each showing the bust of an angel. The angels have a nimbus and are emerging from clouds. The same decoration is repeated on the hinged, conical lid. Between the medallions there is a stylised floral ornament. Likewise, here, the colouring is particularly elegant, with dark and light blue, light green, red and white contrasting with the gilded parts. Only the top of the lid has not survived the test of time. It could have been a cross, a flower or a knob. What is very exceptional, but not visible when the pyx is closed, is the luxurious finish on the inside. The gilding is still entirely intact. The hollow bottom is also a practical detail, making it easy to extract a com-

Provenance:

Collection of Oettingen-Wallerstein, Schloss Harburg, c. 1828-1995; art dealer Trinity Fine Art, London, 1995; private collection, England, 2001; Bernard Descheemaeker-Works of Art, Antwerp, 2001; art dealer Jan Dirven, Antwerp, 2001-2002; collection of Carlo Antonetto, Turin, 2002-2010; bequeathed to the collection of Marco Antonetto, Turin, 2010-2015



Pyx

Copper, polychrome champlevé enamel, engraved, gilded
Limoges, 1225-1250

munion wafer. A pyx decorated with identical angel medallions, on which the medallions alternate with palmette greenery, is kept in the treasury of the Sainte-Valérie abbey church in Chambon-sur-Voueize (dep. Creuse, Nouvelle-Aquitaine region).

Provenance: Private collection, France, 2005

Plaque with the assumption of the soul of a saint

(Limoges, 1210-1220, copper, polychrome champlevé enamel, engraved, gilded, h. 5.3 cm, w. 13,3 cm)

In the Middle Ages, relics played an essential role in Roman Catholic devotions. Human body parts in particular, such as bones, a tooth or a lock of hair, were the most important relics or first-class relics. With the greatest care, they were wrapped in valuable fabrics (that came from Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria or Byzantium). Then they were stored devoutly in caskets made of ivory or sheets of (precious) metal, inlaid

with precious stones. In the 13th century, reliquary shrines appeared in Limoges in the shape of a house, whose walls and roof were covered with plaques of stunning enamel. As the great majority of pilgrims were illiterate, the plaques bore a depiction of the saint in question, where applicable their conversion and miracles, and certainly also their death or martyrdom and assumption into heaven.

The Jean van Caloen Foundation was able to purchase one such plaque that comes from a roof panel of a shrine. The assumption of the soul of a saint is depicted narratively. Two angels take the soul of a saint (it is uncertain which saint), surrounded by a mandorla, through the clouds to Heaven. The figure has widespread arms. His halo reflects his status as a saint, which he achieved through his martyrdom. The faces of the three figures are especially remarkable. They have been applied to the plaque in the form of individual, three-dimensional heads. To achieve this, they were punched into a mould, like coins. The embossed heads, each with a different facial expression, the stylised lines of the robes and wings, the fabulous colours of the enamel and the gilt parts make this plaque an amazing testimony to the professional skill of the artists of eight hundred years ago.



The assumption into Heaven of the soul of a saint (plaque of a reliquary of a shrine)
Copper, polychrome champlevé enamel, engraved, gilded
Limoges, around 1210-1220

The iconography of this roof panel is remarkably similar to the roof of the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket (Utrecht, Catharijneconvent Museum) and the shrine of Valerie of Limoges (Hannover, Museum August Kestner). It is possible that all three of them come from the same workshop.

Provenance: Private collection, France, 1999; art dealer Jan Driven, Antwerp, 1999-2001; private collection Düsseldorf, 2001-2015.

Enamels in the Bruges region

Reliquary shrine of Saint Valerie in the August Kestner Museum in Hanover (Cl. Lindner ©)

Enamels from that period, preserved in the Bruges region, are rather rare. Apart from several private collections, only the treasury of the Saint-Salvator cathedral housed such items before now, namely the statuettes of Mary and the Archangel Gabriel (northern France or Flanders, 12th century) from the church of Sint Donatien, and the curved section of a crozier (Limoges, 1225-1250).



This purchase by the Jean van Caloen Foundation yields four (!) diverse, high-quality additions all at once. The recent acquisition of these mediaeval items is a wonderful and especially worthwhile enrichment for the collection of the castle of Loppem in particular and the Bruges region in general.

Benoit Kervyn de Volkaersbeke



Notes:

¹ B. Descheemaeker, *Works of Art: Newsletter*, no. 20, September 2016, p. 12-15.

² L. Mortari, *Il tesoro della Cattedrale di Anagni*, Rome, 1963, p. 45, no. 32 and fig. 66; E. Taburet-Delahaye, *L'orfèvrerie gothique au Musée de Cluny (XIIIe-début XVe siècle): catalogue*, Paris, 1989, no. 62.