



Kasteel van Loppem

STICHTING JEAN VAN CALOEN

Web Magazine

of the Castle of Loppem

No. 7 — April 30, 2025

In addition to the
enamel collection

Plaque with two apostles under an arcade

In 2021, we discovered three plaques in painted enamel from the second half of the seventeenth century in Jean van Caloen's (1884-1972) library on the Loppem Castle grounds. Each plaque depicts a portrait of a Roman emperor in profile. The portraits, painted in grisaille on a black background, are reminiscent of cameos. This discovery led to the decision to expand the collection — started by Jean van Caloen, and continued with the addition of several pieces by his son Roland (1920-2014) — to include an artistic discipline that was hitherto not represented in the exhibition rooms at Loppem Castle, namely medieval enamel pieces.

In 2022 and 2024, the Jean van Caloen Foundation, which manages the castle grounds and its collections, purchased several objects in enamel dating from 1210 to 1520 and originating from Limoges and Central Italy¹. The medieval pieces were painted using the *champlevé* technique, while the artworks from the Renaissance are painted enamel pieces. Therefore, both techniques are represented in the collection.



Plaque with two apostles under an arcade

Attributed to the *'groupe aux gros drapés toriques'*

Limoges, approx. 1175-1180

Multicoloured enamel *champlevé* à fond vermiculé on copper, gilded

h. 11.1 cm, w. 8 cm, d. 0.7 cm

Loppem Castle, Jean van Caloen Foundation (inv. no. 1000.10)

Part of a 'heavenly home'

The ninth artwork, purchased in early 2025 from *Works of Art*, is a plaque from a shrine where saints' relics were preserved². Such reliquaries, shaped like a rectangular building with a gable roof (the 'heavenly home' of the saint), were, considering their prestigious contents, often made from precious materials (such as ivory and precious metals, decorated with gems, pearls and other precious stones). Nothing was too costly or luxurious to preserve a saint's remains. In this case, the wooden chest or core (*l'âme de bois*), lined with luxurious fabric on the inside, was covered with copper plaques. This plaque depicts two men positioned beneath a double blue and white arcade supported by three columns, each crowned with a capital. The central column features a wavy pattern that is reminiscent of marble, while the columns to the left and right depict a twisting pattern, similar to those found on some church doors or cloister buildings. Both figures are depicted in full length, facing slightly to the right in three-quarter profile, their dark blue cloaks draped over their yellow-green tunics. The style of their clothing, as well as their beards, bare feet and the haloes around their heads leave no doubt as to the fact that they are apostles. The apostle to the right holds a red book in his left hand and the other apostle is holding a scroll. Their heads are made in copper relief as separate elements, which were later applied to the enamel plaque. Their heads, hands and feet are gilded, as are the accent lines on the drapes and folds of their clothing. The figures and architectural elements in multicoloured champlevé enamel contrast with the gilded background adorned with decorative engraved vines, also known as *à fond vermiculé*. The plaque is decorated at the top and bottom with a frieze of multicoloured semi-circles (in red, green, yellow, and white, as well as light and dark blue).

On the back of the plaque, we find a label from the auction catalogue from the collection of Frédéric Engel-Gros (1921), an immediate reference to the oldest known repository of this piece.

Through research and comparison with fully preserved reliquaries³, we were able to piece together how this plaque formed part of a larger whole and how, after the item was confiscated during the French Revolution, probably at the start of the nineteenth century, such sacred items were taken apart and auctioned off to private collectors. We can thus show that this plaque with two apostles once framed the bottom register of a reliquary, specifically the lower left part of the front. This hypothesis is further supported by the fact that the two apostles are facing slightly to the right, drawing attention to the central decoration, most probably an image of the *Crucifixion of Jesus* or a *Majestas Domini* (Christ in Majesty). A similar type of plaque with roughly the same dimensions, imagery and colour palette is currently held in a private collection. On this plaque, the apostles are turned slightly to the left, placing the plaque on the right-hand side of the reliquary's front. Two plaques with two apostles at the front, the same number of apostles on the back, and two on each of the shorter sides would bring the total up to 12 apostles. Perhaps the plaque held at Loppem and the plaque held in the private collection were part of the same reliquary until 1800 and were, therefore, probably produced in the same atelier in Limoges. The plaques date from about 1175-

Plaque with two apostles under an arcade
(detail)



Plaque with two apostles under an arcade
(detail)

1180 and can be attributed to the 'groupe aux gros drapés toriques'. With this purchase, the Jean van Caloen Foundation has further expanded the timeframe of its enamel collection, considering that the second oldest enamel artwork from Limoges kept at Castle Loppem dates from 1210-1220. This artwork is also a plaque from a reliquary, more specifically, one of the plaques from the gabled roof. By placing the two works next to each other, we can see the progression in terms of imagery and techniques. Around the thirteenth century, the enamel producers worked with a blue background, contrasted by the gilded figures. With the older pieces, such as the plaque discussed here, the use of colour is the other way around. The colourful figures are placed against a gilded background, decorated with elegantly engraved vines to create a *fond vermiculé*, creating a completely different effect.

Champlevé à fond vermiculé

The plaque discussed here was produced using an enamelling technique called *champlevé*. The other two techniques used for enamel are *cloisonné* and painted enamel. The *champlevé* technique flourished in Europe between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, whereas painted enamel appears from the mid-fifteenth century onwards. Let us take a closer, step-by-step look at how this plaque depicting apostles under an arcade came to be.

The goldsmith engraved the contours of the apostles and the architectural elements using a metal pen on a copper plate several millimetres thick. The enameller then created shallow troughs where the apostles, arches and friezes would go and filled them with enamel using a spatula. This glassy paste was made by crushing pigments and glass particles with a mortar and pestle. The enameller poured this substance into the troughs, and the copper plate was then fired in an oven. The high oven temperatures melted the grainy enamel powder. Given that every colour has a different melting point, the colours had to be fired separately, starting first with the highest temperature (800 °C), followed by decreasing temperatures (until 700 °C). The melting process reduced the volume of the enamel as the originally applied powder melted, which meant that the enamel had to be applied in several layers. It was not only dangerous work because of the toxic fumes that were released during the process, but it was also highly delicate work because there were several colours involved. The more colours, the more often the item had to return to the oven – six times in the case of this plaque, which used six colours. After the enamel had cooled and set, the entire plaque surface was polished. The goldsmith then added the figures' three-dimensional, sculpted heads and engraved the background with detailed vines. Finally, the plaque was gilded to heighten the contrast with the enamel colours. The plaque was attached to the wooden reliquary box with nails; we can see two nail holes in the bottom frieze and a third hole at the top of the plaque. The reflection of the burning candles or the rays of sunlight falling on the finished reliquary would have created a magical spectacle of bright colours and gold.

Plaque with two apostles under an arcade

Back side with auction catalogue label from the Frédéric Engel-Gros collection in 1921



Medieval enamel at Loppem Castle

Jean van Caloen's policy was to always focus on quality over quantity; he was not concerned about the number of pieces but about which pieces added value to his collection. From his preserved notebooks, we can see that he sometimes sold certain inferior paintings, statues or altarpieces over time to purchase better pieces. Therefore, his collection was constantly evolving. The Foundation that bears his name follows his principles by making purchases that fill gaps and heighten the collection's allure. Medieval enamel was initially missing from Jean van Caloen's collection of statues, altarpiece fragments, paintings, alabaster pieces, stained-glass windows and manuscripts. This shortcoming was addressed in 2022, and the collection of medieval enamel pieces has grown into a beautiful, fascinating and impressive group of nine pieces composed of plaques from reliquaries and a processional cross, a large image of Christ on the cross, a pyx, a pax tablet, and portraits of Roman emperors⁴. These pieces date from about 1175-1180 to the second half of the seventeenth century and, as we mentioned earlier, all the enamel techniques are represented here. With these pieces, Loppem Castle is gradually becoming one of the most important public collections of medieval enamel in Belgium.

Benoit Kervyn de Volkaersbeke

Provenance

Coll. Frédéric Engel-Gros, Château de la Ripaille, Thonon (Fr.), after 1903-1921 / 30.05-01.06.1921, Paris, galerie Georges Petit, lot 133 / coll. Octave Pincot, Paris, before 1946 / 25.11.1946, Paris, Hôtel Drouot, lot 17, pl. III / Ch. Ratton, art dealer, Paris, 1946-1953 / coll. Ernest and Ella Brummer, New York, 1953-1964 / inherited by: coll. Ella Baché-Brummer, New York, 1964-1979 / 17.10.1979, Zürich, Koller, *Brummer*, lot 227 / private coll., USA, 1979-2023

Plaque depicting the ascension of the soul of a saint

Limoges, 1210-1220

Multicoloured enamel champlevé on copper, gilded

h. 13.2 cm, w. 5.2 cm, d. 0.7 cm





Plaque with two apostles under an arcade
 Attributed to the 'groupe aux gros drapés toriques'
 Limoges, approx. 1175-1180
 Multicoloured enamel champlevé à fond vermiculé on copper, gilded
 Loppem Castle, Jean van Caloen Foundation (inv. 1000.10)

Plaque with two apostles under an arcade
 Attributed to the 'groupe aux gros drapés toriques'
 Limoges, approx. 1175-1180
 Multicoloured enamel champlevé à fond vermiculé on copper, gilded
 Private collection

Both plaques formed one whole with between the two a Christ on the cross or a Majestas Domini. It is not known when the two plaques became divided. The size, design and colors do point to a common origin.

Notes

1. Kervyn de Volkaersbeke B., 'Champlevé enamel: 13th-century religious art from Limoges and central Italy', Loppem Castle web magazine, no. 1, june 2022
2. Descheemaeker B., *De figuris et coloribus, Northern and Limoges Enamel (1150-1625)*, catalogue no. 25, 2025
3. Including reliquaries from Lyon (Trésor de l'église Saint-Jean primatiale), Moutiers-en-Tarentaise (Savoie) (Trésor de l'église paroissiale) and Saint Petersburg (Hermitage)
4. The Jean van Caloen Foundation possesses a book of hours (ca. 1470) with a 16th-century binding featuring a plaque depicting a *Pantocrator* (diam. 7 cm, 13th-century, multicoloured champlevé enamel on copper, gilded, inv. 1000.08). This manuscript (SVC Ms. 007) is held in repository at the Bruges Public Library since 1 April 2018.



Reliquary with dogmatic themes

Attributed to the 'groupe aux gros drapés toriques'

Limoges, 1185-1195

h. 17 cm, w. 15 cm, d. 8 cm

Lyon, Trésor de l'église Saint-Jean primatiale

Photo from Gauthier M.-M., *Émaux méridionaux. Catalogue international de l'œuvre de Limoges 1. L'époque romane*, Paris, 1987, pl. CCVII

To the left and right of Christ in majesty an evangelist under an arcade. The shrine, whose left plaque is now kept in Loppem, must have been very similar with two apostles on the left and right and turned to the central representation.