



FABBRI ARTE



Effigy of St. George

*Gold and enamels
Byzantine manufacture
11th century (?)
Diameter: 4,5 in*

Analysis of the work

The work under analysis is a circular gold plaque probably dating back to the eleventh century, of Byzantine manufacture and bearing the effigy of St. George.

We can in fact identify the Saint by translating the writing "οΑγιος Γεωργιος", literally "Agios Georgios", present on the sides of his representation, developed from top to bottom.

The enamel processing technique with which the object was created and decorated is called "Cloisonné".

Cloisonné, otherwise called luster of Byzantium, is an artistic enamel decoration technique, in which thin threads (filigree), strips or small metal partitions (usually in copper), alveoli, or cells (called cloisons in French) are welded or glued to a plate, which acts as a support for the work to be carried out; subsequently, in the areas raised by the metal, enamel is poured, thus obtaining a sort of mosaic whose tesserae are precisely circumscribed by the metal strips.

This technique is of an "additive" type of material (enamel on metal), and is therefore not to be confused with the enamel decoration called champlevé, which, as the French name literally says (raised field), is instead subtractive; in fact, in this last technique, the initial procedure is similar, but the alveoli where the enamel is housed are not added, but smoothed by hand and then finished.

The cloisonné art technique is very ancient, already known in ancient Egypt, and then carried on by the Goths and the Lombards.

However, due to the ideas linked to the iconoclasm of the eighth century, many works were lost.

Subsequently, several specimens were found in Cyprus, Byzantine manufactures of the 10th - 12th centuries, which arrived in Europe most likely due to the looting of the Fourth Crusade of 1204, where techniques and materials were also inherited which then led to the construction of the famous Pala d'Oro of the Basilica of San Marco in Venice.

Quickly, cloisonné enamel then spread with the name of luster of Byzantium, especially in France (since the Merovingian era), then in Germany, and later also in Italy and Georgia.

In France, it took the current name of cloison, from the Latin clausus, meaning closed, indicating the cell (also called partition or compartment) of the support cells, a basic component of this technique.

In central Italy in the thirteenth century, the variant of translucent cloisonné was introduced, more precisely called translucent enamel, attested, for example, by works such as the chalice of St. Francis of Assisi by the medieval goldsmith Guccio di Mannaia, datable to around 1290 .

In that period cloisonné works were also found in Switzerland, Spain, and even in Scandinavia.

The technique and its diffusion also reached the Far East; the first finds date back to 15th century China with the name of Jintailan, literally Jingtai in blue, since it is dedicated exclusively to the imperial court, at the time dressed in blue, of the emperor Jingtai (about 1450-1456) of the Ming dynasty.

As for the processing, before it can be applied to the support, the frit must be pulverized and washed.

The design is then brought back to the support and metal threads are applied along the contours.

The paste glazes are then compressed in the cells, generally one color per cell; the cloisonné enamels were exposed to firing in small clay ovens called "muffles".

The temperature required to melt the glaze paste varies according to the type of glaze, as some have higher melting points than others.

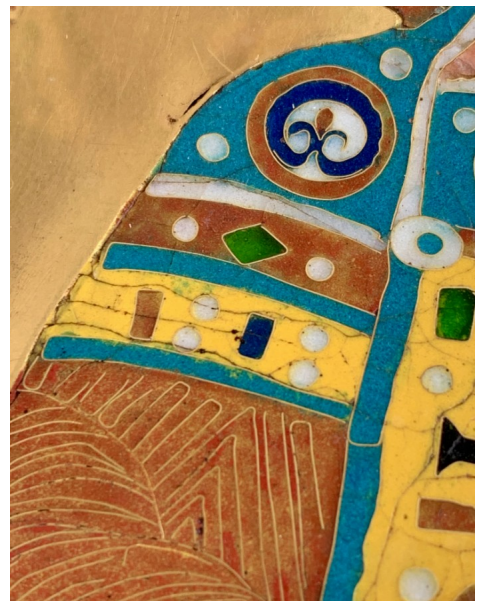
Usually those with a higher melting point are cooked first, then they are added to the others and the oven temperature is lowered with each new cooking.

Since the heat causes a contraction of the glaze, it is necessary to add more paste to each cooking.

The object is then carefully sanded so as to bring out the threads, and for remove any enamel smears so as to give it a surface evenly smooth.

Finally the patient procedure of polishing, using increasingly fine powders, causes cloisonné enamel to show up with all the charm of its translucent patina.

Detail of the work he shows us from near this type of processing



It is now our intention to deepen a particular work mentioned above, namely the Pala d'oro di Venezia (image at the bottom of the page), preserved in the presbytery of the Basilica of San Marco.

It is a large frontal in gold, silver, enamels and precious stones, with truly impressive measures, 140 x 348 cm.

The grandiose goldsmith's work was produced specifically for the basilica in the 10th century and enriched until the 14th century.

The first document that mentions it dates back to the end of the 10th century, when Doge Pietro Orseolo I ordered its construction in Constantinople in 976-978.

It was enriched and enlarged during the dogate of Ordelauffo Falier (in 1105), and further in 1209, after the conquest of Constantinople, on behalf of Pietro Ziani: the seven large enameled panels of the upper register belong to this phase, perhaps coming from the monastery of the Pantocrator, of the Byzantine capital.

The last intervention was ordered by Doge Andrea Dandolo in 1342, commissioning the Venetian goldsmith Giovanni Paolo Boninsegna: the frame was renewed and the enamels rearranged in a Gothic style ensemble.

The goldsmith's signature was rediscovered in the restoration of 1847.



The set of his enamels is among the most relevant of its kind.

The creation of the gothic structure in gilded silver, enriched with pearls, enamels and precious stones, dates back to the last intervention.

There are two main registers, a major lower one (the frontal) and a thinner upper one (the predella), in turn divided into one or more orders.

Inside the space the extraordinary Byzantine enamels were set, dating back to several eras, from the 10th to the 12th century.

According to the inventory of 1796, the altarpiece has 1300 pearls, 400 garnets, 300 sapphires, 300 emeralds, 90 amethysts, 75 balasci, 15 rubies, 4 topazes, and 2 cameos, in all 1927 gems.

The arrangement of the enamels re-proposes the shape of a cathedral projected on a single plane.

The embedded cloisonné tiles have the same function as the stained glass windows, since the rays of light pierce the translucent enamels, engrave the underlying golden sheet and reflect from it.

We now want to focus on these worked panels: they show the effigy of the different Saints, which are made in a very similar way to the work under analysis, so much so that the inscriptions in the Greek alphabet appear substantially identical, and oriented in the same direction. (details to follow).





Another detail with a circular plaque

In addition to the frontal representations, we find other slightly different ones, showing the four Evangelists, seated and intent on writing the Sacred Texts; the four plaques depicting them are arranged around another larger tile adorned with precious stones, bearing the figure of Jesus, all made using the same enamel technique. Below we can observe the decorations described above.





Detail with icon of the Archangel Michael; the iconographic tendency was to make the glances of the Saints present on the side plates converge towards the center of the representation; on the other hand, the characters placed in the center were facing directly towards the observer.

Fabbri Arte
Alto Antiquariato

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