Plaque

Place of origin: Limoges (made)

Date: ca.1480-90 (made)

Artist/Maker: 'Monvaerni' Master (made)

Materials and Techniques: Copper painted in polychrome enamels with some gilded detail

Credit Line: Given by Mrs Bertha F. Skinner in memory of her late husband, Mr Arthur B. Skinner, sometime Director of the Museum.

Museum number: C.143-1911

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 10, case 10

Public access description

This enamel is one of about fifty known extant pieces attributed to the hand of an early master in the technique of painted enamels whose identity is unknown. Referred to as the 'Monvaerni' Master, he was active between about 1480-1500 and may well have also practised manuscript illumination. His enamel designs rely heavily on 1460s woodcuts by German Masters published in books printed in Lyons in 1482-84. There are also similarities to French and Flemish panel paintings and illuminated manuscripts. This plaque depicts St Christopher crossing a river. It is largely based on a wood engraving by the German 'Master E.S.' from the 1460s. The 'Monvaerni' Master was quite faithful to the print he used as his model but he changed the proportions of the figures and introduced some perspective to his scene. He also replaced the city and its church in the source engraving with an impressive castle. He added two swans on the right which he borrowed from another source. St Christopher bears on his shoulders the infant Christ who raises his right hand to give a blessing. He works his way across the water with the aid of an uprooted tree. A hermit looks on from the river bank. It is a night-time scene as evidenced by the dark blue sky and the lantern held by the hermit.

St. Christopher (meaning "Christ-bearer" in Greek) is patron saint of travellers and was said to sustain all who looked at his image. Said to have been a Canaanite of huge stature, guided by a hermit he sought to serve Christ by devoting himself to carrying the poor and weak over the river. One night, he carried a small child who grew heavier at each step. The child revealed he was Christ and told the saint that by carrying him, he had carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. He told Christopher to plant his staff (a palm tree) in the ground and the next day it blossomed and bore dates.

Limoges, central France, was famous for the production of champleve enamels from the late 12th century until the town was destroyed by the Black Prince in 1370. The enamel industry began to revive about a century later but the technique of painted enamels produced from 1460s/70s was quite different from the earlier medieval work. The copper, probably from Spanish mines, was first of all hammered to thin sheets which were then worked on by the skilful enamellers. It was a long and careful process, with several firings to achieve the finished result.

Descriptive line

Rectangular copper plaque painted in polychrome enamels with some gilded detail with a scene of St. Christopher bearing the Christ Child. By the so-called 'Monvaerni' Master, Limoges, about 1480-90.

Physical description

This rectangular plaque depicts St. Christopher crossing a river. He bears on his shoulders the infant Christ who raises his right hand to give a blessing. A hermit looks on from the river bank. The saint wears a blue tunic and a long sleeve cloak which billows in the wind. His leggings are rolled up to keep them dry. He works his way across the water with the aid of an uprooted tree. The wind causes choppy wavelets in the river which are picked out in white enamel over the grey. In the water are two swans, two boats and a mermaid or perhaps a siren embellished in gold. There are white flowers on a mound to the left and a black bird sits on a stump in the foreground. There is a large castle in the distance to the left, the hermit stands near the bottom of a flight of steps leading up towards a chapel amongst trees. It is a night-time scene as evidenced by the dark blue somewhat blotchy sky, and the lantern held forth by the hermit. There is a touch of pinky-red on the pale faces of the three participants. The reverse of the plaque, or counter-enamel, is a somewhat lumpy violet-blue with some red spots.

St. Christopher ("Christ-bearer") is patron saint of travellers and was said to sustain all who looked at his image. He is still regarded as a saint by the Roman Catholic Church but was removed from the Catholic Church Calendar in 1969 owing to doubts about historicity. The Council of Trent (1545-63), had failed four centuries previously to abolish his cult. He is described in the 'Golden Legend' (a book of hagiographies or saints' lives written about 1260) as a Canaanite of huge stature who sought to serve Christ by devoting himself to carrying the poor and weak over the river. One night, he carried a small child who grew heavier at each step. The child revealed he was Christ so the saint had been carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. He told Christopher to plant his staff (a palm tree) in the ground and the next day it blossomed and bore dates.

The enameller has taken for his main source a German wood engraving by "Master E.S." who was active about 1450-67. He worked in the Rhineland, notably in Strasbourg. The 'Monvaerni' Master was quite faithful to his model but he changed the proportions of the figures and introduced some perspective to his scene. He also replaced the city and its church of the source engraving with an impressive castle. He added two swans on the right which he borrowed from another source - an engraving of St. John the Baptist by the eponymous Meister des Johannes Baptista. The swans also appear in a Nativity by the 'Monvaerni' Master formerly in the collection of Prince Czartoryski, Goluchow Castle, Poland.
Dimensions
Height: 18.4 cm, Width: 21.2 cm, Depth: 0.7 cm, Weight: 0.64 kg

Museum number
C.143-1911

Object history note
Formerly in the Pierpont Morgan Collection and given by Pierpont Morgan to Arthur B. Skinner.

Historical significance: This is one of about fifty known extant pieces attributed to the hand of an early master in the technique of painted enamels. He was active between about 1480-1500 and may well have also practised manuscript illumination. Although his identity is unknown, this artist is now commonly referred to as the 'Monvaerni' Master. His enamel designs, many of which show scenes from the Nativity and Passion of Christ, rely heavily on 1460s woodcuts by German Masters such as 'Master E.S.' These woodcuts were published in books printed in Lyons in 1482-84. There are also similarities to French and Flemish panel paintings and illuminated manuscripts. The V&A St. Christopher plaque is largely based on a wood engraving by Master E.S. from 1460s while a 'Monvaerni' Master plaque depicting St. Christopher in the collection of the Louvre, Paris (inv. no. OA6309l) seems to be based on an earlier northern French or Flemish model of 1420s.

'Monvaerni' first appeared in 1843 in a catalogue issued by the amateur Lyons collector M. Didier Petit. He owned a triptych which now belongs to the Taft Museum, Cincinnati (inv.no.1931.268). The central Crucifixion scene is flanked by St. James and St. Catherine of Alexandria on the two wings. Inscribed along the blade of the sword held by St. Catherine are the words: 'AVE MARIA' and 'MONVAE3NI'. The '3' has been read variously as an 'R', a 'P' or a symbol indicating abbreviation. Didier Petit read it as an 'R' and assumed it was a signature - an assumption which gained credence even though there is no documentary evidence to back up such a notion. In 1865, A. Darcel revealed a variant, 'MONVAE' on a plaque in the collection of M. Eugène Tondu. The Louvre acquired a set of twelve plaques from an altarpiece (inv.nos.OA6309-6309l) by the same artist in 1909 and the following year, H.P. Mitchell revealed that the mysterious inscription was not a signature but the name of a bishop depicted on an Adoration plaque (again by the same artist) in the Limoges Museum (inv.no.23). The bishop was Jean Barton de Montbas, Bishop of Limoges and Archbishop of Nazareth. Mitchell proposed that the '3' in 'MONVAE3NI' was an abbreviation symbol and the inscription in full would read: 'MONVA EPISCOPUS NAZARETHI'. In 1914, Haute-Vienne archivist, Alfred Leroux, suggested 'MONVMENTVM ARCHIEPISCOPI NAZARENI'. Henry Martin in 1917 suggested 'MONVAERHL' was an anagram of 'M. NOVALHER', a possible artist from a well-known Limoges enamelling dynasty, but this theory has since been discounted. Verdier (1967) drew attention to 'MONVAE' on a stone in the foreground of a Pietà on the central part of a triptych formerly in the Germeau Collection (Paris) and now in the Czartoryski Museum (Krakow) - probably the above-mentioned Tondu panel reworked into a triptych. Some of the floor tiles visible in the 'Christ before Pontius Pilate' plaque in the Baltimore Museum bear an 'MV' monogram. Verdier (1995) also pointed out the 'consonantal ambivalence' of 'V' and 'B' in relation to Monva/Monbas which he said endured in modern Spanish pronunciation.

An Adoration plaque in the Musée Municipal de l'Évêché, Limoges, shows Jean Barton de Montbas, Bishop of Limoges (1484-1510) kneeling at a prie-dieu at the feet of St. John the Evangelist. Barton's coat-of-arms lean against the prie-dieu. They are also to be seen on a keystone in the choir at the collegiate church of Eymoutiers, about 45km. from Limoges. This bishop is known as Jean II Barton to distinguish him from his uncle Jean I Barton, his predecessor as Bishop of Limoges (1458-84) who resigned from that position to become Archbishop 'in partibus' of Nazareth (an honorific title). Jean I Barton died on 3rd May 1497 and was buried in the choir of Limoges Cathedral. It is Jean I Barton who is depicted on the V&A's Pieta plaque museum number 4868-1901, presented by his patron saint, John the Baptist. His crozier is in the form of a double cross or cross of Jerusalem. Inscribed along the blade of the sword held by St. Catherine are the words: 'AVE MARI(A)' and 'MONVAE3NI'. Jean I Barton was buried in the choir of Limoges Cathedral. It is Jean I Barton who is depicted on the V&A's Pieta plaque number 4868-1901, presented by his patron saint, John the Baptist. His crozier is in the form of a double cross or cross of Jerusalem. This refers not only to St. Martial, first Bishop of Limoges, but also to the archbishopric of Nazareth and to the Holy Land, from where came relics of the True Cross. Both the V&A and Limoges plaques can therefore be dated to 1484-97. Their arched tops and similar size suggest that when the Jean II plaque was made it was deliberately matched to the existing Jean I plaque. It may well have been Jean I Barton who commissioned the Taft triptych, possibly as a votive offering, especially as the MONVAERNI inscription is in the genitive case. Jean I Barton is also depicted on a (now restored) stained glass window of about 1475 in Eymoutiers church, in conjunction with his patron saint.

Historical context note
Limoges, central France, was famous for the production of champleve enamels from the late 12th century until the town was destroyed by the Black Prince in 1370. The enamel industry began to revive about a century later but the technique of painted enamels produced from 1460s/70s was quite different from the earlier medieval work. The copper, probably from Spanish mines, was first of all hammered to thin sheets which were then worked on by the skilful enamellers. It was a long and careful process, with several firings to achieve the finished result.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O180345/plaque-monvaerni-master/