

Medieval and Renaissance Decorative Arts from the 1100s to the 1500s

Lavish works of art, created for use in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic church, glorified God in their refined craftsmanship and precious materials. Many medieval theologians, notably the Abbot Suger of the French royal church, equated divine light—or spiritual truth—with the actual light shining through stained glass windows and glittering from gold, jewels, and enamels. This liturgical dedication was coupled with civic pride, as each community or family competed with its neighbors for the best and costliest church embellishments.

In cathedral treasuries and in the private chapels of wealthy patrons, the educated could contemplate the objects' complex religious symbolism, known as iconography, or "writing in images." During the celebration of Mass, however, which was accompanied by incense, music, and ritual drama, the intricate designs and bright colors might be glimpsed only briefly. To peasants and poor villagers, these rich appointments of the church brought a promising vision of the heavenly paradise down to earth.

Chalice of the Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis

Sardonyx cup, Egyptian (Alexandria), 2d to 1st century B.C.
Jeweled and gilded silver mounting, French (Paris), 1137–1140
Height 0.184 m (7 1/4 in.) Widener Collection 1942.9.277



This chalice, composed of an ancient cup in a medieval setting, is one of the world's most splendid treasures to survive from the Middle Ages. The jewels encrusted around its rim prevented drinking from the cup; the sacramental wine was sipped through a gold straw, now missing. Until 1791, when the chalice was confiscated during the French Revolution, it remained in Saint-Denis, the royal abbey near Paris. Saint-Denis, named for the national patron of France, served as the school for crown princes and the burial site for kings and queens.

Created at the order of Abbot Suger, the chalice was probably used in the consecration ceremony of the abbey's high altar chapel on 11 June 1144. By rebuilding the church's east end in pointed arch vaults, illuminating it with stained glass, and furnishing it with objects such as this elegant chalice, Suger helped inaugurate the Gothic style. Suger, abbot of Saint-Denis from 1122 to 1151, was a Benedictine monk and brilliant politician who served as regent of France while Louis VII and Eleanor of Aquitaine led the Second Crusade.

The cup was carved from a single block of sardonyx, a semiprecious gemstone, in ancient Egypt during the Hellenistic period. Deep, scalloped fluting intensifies the stone's richly colored veins. (Reflections from the top of the museum's case allow visitors to look inside the cup's smooth interior, as they would if taking communion.)

Suger proudly wrote, "The red sard's hue, vying with the blackness of the onyx, is variegated in such a manner that the properties of both seem to compete in trespassing on each other." In addition to appreciating the bold beauty of this pagan cup, the medieval mind would have lent religious symbolism to its colors: white for purity, black for humility, and blood or flame red for sacrifice.

Court jewelers mounted the cup in a gilded silver setting with delicate gold-wire filigree and adorned it with gems. A few of the cabochon, or rounded, stones may be original, but all the jewels cut with sharp facets are replacements.

detail of medallion

Later repairs also account for four of the five medallions in the base, those with grain and grapes to symbolize the eucharistic bread and wine. The only remaining medieval relief depicts Christ flanked by the Greek letters mentioned in the Book of Revelation: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."



Crucifix

Jasper intaglio, Roman, A.D. 2d century
Cloisonné and *champlevé* enamel and glass on gilded copper alloy, probably Rhenish or Mosan, about 1150/1175
Height 0.370 m (14 9/16 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.282

The figure of Christ possibly once held relics; its back contains a covered hollow. Atop the cross is a plaque bearing the Latin phrase, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." The hiltlike base permits the crucifix to be inserted into a staff that was carried aloft in processions.

The interlocking heart-shaped palmettes are in the style of enamel workshops in the Rhine and Meuse or Maas River valleys. To make enamels, sand, alkali, and lead are first melted to form a glass, to which different metal oxides are added as colorants. Kiln firings convert the various enamel pastes to a glassy state and fuse them to metal backings. In the *cloisonné* technique, thin metal strips are soldered to a metal base, creating separate compartments, or *cloisons*. These cells outline the elements of the design and prevent adjacent areas of colored enamels from running together during firing. In the less labor-intensive *champlevé* technique, the design is carved out of the metal, leaving raised contours, and the vitreous pastes are placed in the depressions.

detail of jasper

At the center of the halo is a jasper gemstone carved in ancient Rome to represent two birds perched on a wine cup beneath a sheltering tree. Adapting precious pagan objects to Christian use, as here and in Abbot Suger's chalice, was a frequent practice in the Middle Ages. The jasper may have been selected for this location because of its blood-red color. Its classical cup also recalls Jesus' blessing of wine at the Last Supper.

Reliquary Châsse

French (Limoges), about 1175/1180
Champlevé enamel on gilded copper with oak core
Width 0.267 m (10 1/2 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.278



This *châsse*, a kind of treasure chest, once contained religious relics. Its gabled, architectural shape suggests both a tomb and a house in paradise.

On the front, Joseph witnesses the Adoration of the Magi. The Three Kings' horses are engraved into the copper at the left. The top and sides depict half-length figures of Christ blessing, Saint Peter holding his key, and other, unidentified saints. Grotesque hybrids with human heads, birds' bodies, and flowering tails adorn the back, reflecting the fantastic element in Romanesque art.

detail of back side

For centuries, the town of Limoges in central France was a major production center for enamels. Workshops there favored the *champlevé* technique. Instead of soldering individual walls or dams of gold ribbons on top of gilded metal backings, craftsmen made *champlevé* designs by chiseling or gouging into thick copper or bronze plates, leaving raised surfaces and edges. These concave fields were filled with damp pastes of ground glass colored with metal oxides and then fired. The ornate range of colors here includes at least three blues as well as turquoise, green, yellow, red, and white.

Aquamanile in the Form of a Lion

Northern French or Mosan, about 1200
Bronze with traces of gilding
Length 0.175 m (6 7/8 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.281



Aquamanile in the Form of a Horseman

Probably English or Scandinavian, 1200s
Bronze
Length 0.355 m (14 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.280



Aquamanilia are elaborate water pitchers in the shape of

humans or animals, which are used to wash hands over a basin for either religious rites or secular meals. Popular by the 1100s and probably inspired by Islamic vessels encountered during the Crusades, *aquamanilia* served in churches, monastery refectories, and castle banquet halls.

The lion, with its sturdy body, prominent ribs, and raised head, embodies all the strength and alertness of the beast. Lacking a handle, this small *aquamanile* was held in one hand, as suggested by the wear on its gilding. For the user's amusement, the panting tongue allowed water to continue to drip long after pouring. The vigorous style of the curly mane, running in a braided ridge down the back, is associated with the Meuse or Maas River area of modern-day Holland, Belgium, and northern France.

The unusually large horseman required a handle. The horse's tail and part of its reins have broken away, as has the rider's left arm, which may have held a falcon, weapon, or hunting horn. His fashionably pointed shoes are inserted in stirrups. Unlike the lion's detailed complexity, this horseman has a simplified, almost abstract, treatment and a sleek surface texture reminiscent of bronze sculpture from medieval England and Scandinavia.

Pyx in the Form of a Dove

French (Limoges),
about 1220/1230
Champlevé enamel
and glass on
gilded copper
Height 0.182 m
(7 1/8 in.)
Widener Collection
1942.9.284



A pyx is a low, usually cylindrical, container for sacramental bread. Pyxes in the shape of doves, representing the Holy Spirit, may have been used by the 700s in western Europe and possibly earlier in the Byzantine East. A hinged lid in this bird's back opens for the insertion and removal of wafers. Engraved on the inside of the lid is the Right Hand of God, in perpetual blessing over the Eucharist.

While a pyx could be kept in a church sacristy or on an altar, some versions, such as this one, were designed for suspension above the altar. For this purpose, chains would have been attached to its base.

detail of opened lid

The Book of Revelation describes heaven as a walled city, and this bird's nest takes the form of towered walls. When hung from chains, both the Heavenly Jerusalem and the Dove of the Trinity would literally float in the air.

The dove's spread claws, sharp beak, and fanned tail lend great liveliness to the sculpture, as do its translucent blue glass eyes. The patterns of the feathers in *champlevé* are characteristic of enamel work from the French city of Limoges.



Ciborium

Spanish (Catalonia), about 1330/1350
Champlevé enamel on gilded copper
Height 0.361 m (14 1/4 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.279

The ciborium, raised on a foot or pedestal, evolved from the short pyx in the 1200s. This tall vessel's lid is hinged to receive wafers of eucharistic bread. The crowning cross is most unusual in having survived on its original setting.

In addition to individual figures of angels on the bowl and the Three Kings on the foot, this ciborium is decorated with scenes of the Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Annunciation to the Shepherds, Adoration of the Magi, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. These biblical episodes are not positioned in narrative sequence. Specific relationships, as yet unexplained, may connect the subjects on the lid, bowl, and foot to each other and to the cross on top.

Like the reliquary *châsse*, this ciborium is made of gilded copper in the *champlevé* technique. Unlike that Limoges reliquary, where the figures are colored, this ciborium silhouettes its gilded scenes against enameled backgrounds.

The technique shows the influence of Limoges enamel work from France on the craftsmen of the Catalan region in northeastern Spain, where it was made. The ciborium reportedly came from Poblet, a Cistercian abbey that was the burial place for the kings of Aragon.



Morse with the Trinity

Trinity, angels, and clouds, French (Paris),
about 1400/1410
Setting from the crown
of thorns outward, west-
ern European, 1884/1897
Gold, enamel, and pearls
Diameter 0.126 m (5 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.287

A monumental work of sculpture on a miniature scale, this image of the grieving God the Father bears comparison with the best Gothic statues. The tortured body of Jesus is equally fine in its modeling, casting, and chiseling. Even the four adoring angels—each smaller than a quarter of an inch—have expressive features. Completing the Trinity, the tiny Dove of the Holy Spirit flies between the Father and the Son.

Thick enamel pastes in a tree-gum binder were painted directly on the solid gold sculpture. The elegantly slender hands, curving folds in the garments, and God's gracefully curled hair and beard reflect the late Gothic international style. This courtly taste was favored throughout Europe in the early fifteenth century.

A morse is a clasp worn by a bishop to fasten the neck of his cope. The superb sculpture here, however, originally existed in some other setting than this golden brooch, which did not exist when the central group was photographed in 1884.

In 1404, an inventory was conducted of the private chapel of Philip the Bold, duke of Burgundy. The list mentions a gold tablet with "a Trinity enameled in white with four little angels around it." Since white is the dominant tone of this exquisite piece, even though several other colors are present, it is possible that very object, removed in later years from the duke's jeweled shrine.



The Angel of the Annunciation and The Virgin Annunciate

Italian (Florence), 1498/1503
Executed by Giovanni di Domenico, known active 1503
Stained glass, lead, and iron
Height 1.994 m (78 1/2 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.312 and 1942.9.311

As God's messenger, the kneeling archangel announces the Incarnation, or conception of Jesus. Above Gabriel, the Hand of God the Father appears in blessing. The Dove of the Holy Spirit flies toward Mary, who turns from her reading stand with calm humility.

These windows were created for the Florentine church of Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, where they illuminated the monks' choir, installed above and behind the high altar. Matching borders, with fruits and flowers of paradise, unify the pair.

Separate images of Gabriel and Mary are rare in stained glass windows. Renaissance interests in perspective and human emotion allow a continuous "read" between these two windows. A yellow classical cornice crosses through both designs. The holy personages also communicate by their gestures and expressions. These large-scale, gracefully moving figures in three-dimensional settings are characteristic of Renaissance art in Florence.

Construction of the chapel began in 1498, and by February 1503, payment was due to Giovanni di Domenico, a priest and glazier who made the windows. Father Giovanni may have designed the painted glass himself, but he also might have followed a master painter's drawings.