Bulletin of the
Rhode Island School of Design
Issued Quarterly

Vol. II JANUARY, 1914 No. 1

HOLY FAMILY AND ST. JOHN
Gift of Mrs. Jesse H. Metcalf

GIOVANNI DELLA ROBBIA
Italian, XVI century

A DELLA-ROBBIA GROUP.

AMONG recent accessions of note in the Museum is an enameled terra-cotta group which is attributed to Giovanni della Robbia This group, which doubtless formed part of a lunette, represents the Holy Family and St. John and is very well preserved. It is a notable addition to the group of Renaissance objects at present in the collections, chief of which is the "Deposition of Christ," attributed to Giovanni Minello, and which has been described in the July Bulletin of the School of Design. Like the Minello group, this latest addition of the work of the period comes from Mrs. Jesse H. Metcalf, to whom both the School and the Museum are indebted for many gifts of value.

In the Renaissance, painting and sculpture were in a sense the handmaids of architecture, but the greatest characteristic of the art of the period was the way in which those responsible for the artistic works which grace our museums, or better still the palaces or churches for which they were intended, breathed their individuality into the forms, pictorial or plastic, which passed through their hands. This individual expression was peculiarly to be found in the work of the della Robbias, especially in that of Luca and Andrea.

Luca ranks with Ghiberti and Donatello

as one of the greatest artists of the early Renaissance. He was famous quite as much for his sculpture in the round and relief in marble as for his work in terra-cotta. It must not be supposed that sculpture in that material was original with him for the use of terra-cotta is in evidence from the earliest days, but he discovered and expressed new possibilities in it and added the practice of enameling the surface of his work. At first he used a preponderance of white, but gradually he enlarged his use of colors, finding an especial delight in the decorative value of such positive color-notes as blue, yellow and green. But he always exercised an artistic restraint in their use which unfortunately soon became lost in the hands of those who carried on this type of work.

Andrea, nephew of Luca, assisted him in the latter part of his career, but lacked the spontaneity and genius of his uncle so that he gradually lost the refinements which place Luca's work so high. Neither do those of his works which date after Luca's death show the same high quality of enamel.

This gradual departure from the type of decorative sculpture so ably brought into existence by Luca, is still further exemplified when the work of Giovanni della Robbia is considered. Giovanni was the son of Andrea, and at first his work showed his appreciation of the heritage bequeathed to him by the illustrious founder of the school. But he later yielded to the commercializing influence of the day, and, being a painter as well as a sculptor, we find him taking liberties with the chaste treatment of the relation of background and figure which characterized the work of Luca and Andrea. His latest work shows a wider range of colors used, elaborated drapery and a flesh-treatment which was either painted in a realistic way, or else left in the natural color of the terra-cotta.

The group which now graces the galleries of the Museum can in no wise be attributed to Giovanni's later and decadent period. It reveals in many ways the influence of the same restraint which is noted above, although the flesh is in the natural terra-cotta color. Indeed the treatment of drapery, the quality of the glaze and the general excellence of the composition is of such a high grade that some have felt that traces of Andrea's direct influence could be seen in the work.

The question of attribution in the case of many examples coming from the della Robbia school is complicated by the fact that the type of decoration to which enameled terra-cotta especially lends itself admits of several artists working upon the same composition but treating individually the figures or border which go to make up the whole, since they were modeled, glazed and fired separately.

It is unfortunate that we do not possess the background, and the decorated border which, with our figures, once graced a lunette in a church. It would be interesting to known its former location, but that is out of the question. It is sufficient that we have a work of art which so aptly expresses the spirit of the Renaissance, that strange mingling of deep religious feeling with the heritage of classic days, that union of personality and genius which characterized the remarkable series of geniuses whose works in literature, music and art have immortalized their names. Although not of the genius of the greatest leaders, Giovanni will always prove of interest to all students as the last of the great della Robbias, and one whose work retains the salient features of the period.

L. E. R.

A LIMOGES ENAMEL.

IN the wealth of sculpture and of painting which has survived the centuries, the student finds so much of interest that he easily overlooks some of the more humble arts, which might merit his consideration, and in which he could find the same characteristics of style which are exemplified in more pretentious work. One of these branches which offers unusual interest to student and transient visitor alike is that of enamel work.

LIMOGES ENAMEL

Gift of Mrs. Jesse H. Metcalf French, XVI century

Both from the technical difficulties involved in the manufacture and the opportunities for design and color which are afforded by the nature of the material, has this work appealed to artists and craftsmen.

By the term "enamel" is understood the use of colored glass, fused on a metal base by heat. This branch of art is one which dates from early days to our own. It is an open question whether or not the Egyptians ever used this process, but there is sufficient evidence to show its use in Greek and Roman days, not only from literary sources but from specimens now existing in museum collections. The artist and craftsman of Byzantium as well as the Sassanians and the Persians availed themselves of this effective medium. Goth and Celt also found artistic expression through enamel, but the greatest centre of its manufacture

was France, and especially Limoges.

A representative example of this interesting process is illustrated above, and is a recent gift from Mrs. Jesse H. Metcalf to the Museum collections. These tablets were made for intimate use, and played no small part in the private devotions of the period. The enamel in question represents the scene at the foot of the cross. The body of Jesus is laid across his Mother's lap, while on one side of her stands Mary Magdelene and on the other Salome. In the distance are seen the towers and walls of a mediæval town which the artist of the period interprets as those of Jerusalem. The dark sky above with its golden stars, the sorrowing group in the foreground and the grim cross towering above all, are features which impress us to-day, despite the sense of archaism and stiffness in drawing which is reminiscent of earlier characteristics of the craft especially the Byzantine. But it is a reminiscence only, for the figures have that power of expression which denotes the spirit of the Renaissance.

The city of Limoges in Aquitania was a Roman colony and was known in antiquity for the quality of its goldsmiths' work. As this material, with silver, was the basis on which the early enamel work was done, it is possible that the skill of its artisans in the later days in this medium was the result of centuries of endeavor. That but little if any of this early enamel is left to us is not remarkable when we remember the intrinsic value of the gold and silver used as a base.

Limoges enjoyed unusual prosperity in the twelfth century, being the source of many pieces of church furniture. To it were attracted Byzantine and Venetian craftsmen who added their skill and trade-secrets to those already in use in that city. From that century to the middle of the sixteenth century, enameling on metal bases was easily the most important phase of art in that section of France.

There was considerable change in the technical processes used to obtain results during this period. From the twelfth to the end of the fourteenth century the method in greatest favor was that which is called at the present time "champlevé." This is a process in which the metal base is so chiseled or hammered as to make depressions to hold the enamel. In this way the design was raised in relief. The process which characterized the Byzantine work as well as that followed by the workmen of China and Japan was that called to-day "cloisonné," in which the design was created by soldering metal strips onto the base. Examples of this work from the Orient may be seen in the Japanese and Chinese gallery in the Museum. It is characteristic of both of these processes that the enamel is usually opaque. In later days Japanese and Indian craftsmen from Jeypore made great use of transparent enamel.

Both in cloisonnè and champlevé processes there are decided limitations, for all the work of the time shows little opportunity for shading and the introduction of perspective or a landscape background. This difficulty was overcome somewhat by an engraved or chased design which was covered with transparent enamels.

With this as a heritage the workmen of Limoges carried the work a step further and produced the subjects in painted enamel. To this class belongs the plaque illustrated. It may be of interest to note the process employed. An unpolished plate of copper has its surface covered with a thick layer of enamel, usually dark in color. To insure uniform shrinkage in the firing both sides of the plate are covered in this manner. On this the drawing is made in a black enamel, after which the general masses of background and figures are laid in rather heavily. In flesh treatment a very dark enamel, often violet in color, is first put on, after which the white is applied; this brings out the shadows in proportion to its thickness. The final details such as

hair, the stars in the sky and light spots on the drapery are still further brought out through the use of gold, lightly brushed on.

No class of objects is so hard to designate as the work of any particular artist as enamels, since the signed pieces are very uncommon. The leading family of enamelers of the period, however, were the Penicauds and their treatment is comparatively well-known. The plaque in question shows certain traits of drawing and handling of the subject which suggest that the work is an example of the school which the Penicauds founded, probably the work of one of their artist-craftsmen and direct pupils. After all, its chief interest lies in its being a distinctive and unusual example of the school of enamelers in Limoges in the early part of the sixteenth century.

L. E. R.

PRESERVATION OF PICTURES.

THE building up of large fortunes together with the development of an art-loving public has been the cause of bringing to the United States many of the masterpieces of painting. This is a trite remark but necessary since it leads to the question of the precise effect which this change of ownership will have upon these pictures. Dispassionate consideration forces one to admit that there are many features attending the change which will, to say the least, not add to the beauty of the masterpieces in question nor to their continued existence as such.

These features will receive due consideration further on, but it is of importance in this introduction to note the present situation and its relation to the general subject of preservation. In the first place the museum official or private collector is not necessarily a man with a knowledge of the technical side, that is, of the construction of the old pictures. He may be, and usually is, well versed in the literary side of his subject, and has nearly always a genuine love of the beauties produced by the method and craftsmanship of the old painters.

Such an official or collector lacking this knowledge of construction is necessarily more or less at the mercy of the dealers and critics, pseudo and otherwise, when it comes to deciding on the merit of paintings, their genuineness, and the extent to which their surfaces may have been altered in preparation for sale. Therefore he cannot prevent the destruction commonly carried on under the name of restoration for he cannot detect it.

There should be some provision made for the earnest study and publication of knowledge of the old methods; otherwise, in a short space of time there will be very few pictures without literally repainted surfaces.

Our artists of to-day are not skilled craftsmen, for their effort lies in another direction, that of painting objects as they are actually seen; in other words, in actual color relations, a detail which did not trouble the old painter at all. To the latter, perfection of craftsmanship was the ultimate desire. Colors and mediums were chosen and methods of using them studied till the utmost beauty and permanency of the color itself was achieved; furthermore the pictures were properly constructed. The absolute relation of color, as for example, between a robe and a background, did not interest the painter of old. To-day the effort concerns itself with the absolute relations of color, and little if any with regard to its beauty or permanency in itself.

It must be left to some one other than the writer to decide which of these ends is the more worthy, but inquiry on the part of any one who is interested will reveal clearly that for beauty of color as such, permanency and craftsmanship, there is no comparison between the two. Without exception the best of the modern work is crude and amateurish when judged by the standard of the best of the old.

The only people to-day who are successfully using glazes, which were handled with such consummate skill in the past, are the restorers and forgers. Artists ignore all method as a rule, and in fact,

frequently regard the mechanics of painting as a "trick" analogous to the glazing of an oil painting with water-color.

The brilliancy of the fine old paintings is to-day as unchanged as ever (where the picture has escaped bad handling), though usually there is a thick and sufficient coat of brown or greenish stain on the surface to make the age of the painting apparent to the most casual observer.

Modern pictures do not grow old gracefully, but descend into gloom, murkiness, and harsh tones in a few years. To this statement there are exceptions which merely prove the rule. This change is largely due to poor preparation of canvas and pigment and improper mediums, all of which are now in the hands of manufacturers instead of being in direct charge of the painters themselves. In former days the effort was toward perfection of materials, to-day it is in the direction of cheapness of production. The painter of to-day at the very outset is forced to accept commercial conditions which influence and govern his output.

There are many who wonder at the amount of discussion concerning "old masters," feeling perfectly sure that unnecessary emphasis is being put upon this subject; that it is merely a fad and fashion and that pictures exactly as good are being produced to-day; indeed there are many who favor only modern work. To these it seems worse than absurd to give fabulous sums for a rotting fragment of canvas or panel.

The fact remains, however, that no price is too high for a real masterpiece. It is something more than a picture, since it is a thing absolutely impossible to replace.

Just as the Grecian sculptures became not merely marble blocks but products of a civilization never again to be paralleled, so these masterpieces of painting are a product of conditions more than of men. The religious feeling of the time, the political situation, the very savagery and cruelty of human existence in the frequent disturbances, all had a direct bearing on producing conditions which made possible these pictures.

To-day we have a view of the whole civilized world on a commercial basis. The conditions may be more suitable for the comfort and safety of the masses, but it seems a fact that commercial organization on a large scale does not make for the elevation of Art.

Therefore it amazes some to see the spectacle of a new and wealthy nation madly spending millions to acquire priceless and very fragile works of Art, yet making no intelligent provision for their preservation and care, on the contrary being accessory to the fact of hastening their destruction.

H. E. T.

DOCENT SERVICE AT THE SCHOOL OF DESIGN.

THE three great phases of activity which characterize the museums of to-day are acquisition, preservation and education. The institutions of art in the early days of the nineteenth century apparently devoted the greater part of their endeavors to the first of these phases with the result that growth was rapid so far as quantity was concerned. Many museums of that period and others of the present time justify the comment which was recently offered by a well-known American critic who called museums "cold-storage warehouses for works of art." The justice of this remark lies in the fact that little or no attempt was made by those museums to make any use of the material thus acquired beyond that of general exhibition.

The second of the phases of activity, that of preservation of the monuments of man's creative genius, is the natural result of acquisition. The inevitable changes of time and place make it imperative that constant care be exercised to prolong the life of the works of art in question. How important this duty is on the part of all museums and collectors in general, is discussed elsewhere in this Bulletin.

The third and greatest function of a museum is that calling for such activity on the part of those responsible for its policy as will acquaint the general public with the interest and value of the objects on exhibition, to develop the standard of public and individual taste, and to assist the public school system as well as private organizations. This phase of activity is a matter of very recent years, for the early museum of the nineteenth century existed almost entirely for the man of leisure and culture and the antiquarian. To-day our museums are offering every inducement to the thinking citizen to bring him to a more complete and helpful conception of the universal application of art to the problems of the present day. In former days interest in art, both fine and applied, was largely confined to a few; to-day it belongs to all, old and young.

The astonishing feature of the history of education during the past century is that so many years passed without any direct attempt to bring the public and private schools into such relation to the museums that the direct value of the objects there shown as material illustrative of history, civilization and art could be emphasized.

The twentieth century method of teaching is through such exposition as calls for laboratory illustration. For the history teacher the museum offers the best possible laboratory, affording repeated and very tangible evidence of the heritage which has come down to us from the past.

In company with other live institutions of like character, the School of Design offers docent service whose aim is to reveal the interest and value of the objects in the galleries. An important step in the right direction was effected during the past fall, in that arrangements were made for classes from each of the grammar schools of the city to spend a pleasant hour in the museum galleries under guidance of a member of the museum staff. The value of such work is seen in the interest aroused in the whole class, the enthusiastic questions which are asked, the appreciation of the teacher who realizes the value of objective over subjective teaching, and the increased knowledge both among scholars and parents that Providence has an art museum which is the home of the world of art and beauty and which has a wealth of interest for all. That so comprehensive a series of groups of scholars was possible is due to the far-sightedness of Providence teachers, especially the head-masters.

Activity in that direction is by no means confined to the public schools. It may be enjoyed by any one who asks for it, and it is offered without any charge.

A further extension of such service is seen in the Sunday talks which have been given in the galleries for the past two years. These talks, which are given from three to four o'clock from the first Sunday in December to the last Sunday in March, inclusive, have brought before an ever-increasing audience, speakers of authority and interest whose subjects are found among the works of art in the galleries, and whose pleasure it is to reveal the possibilities of the Museum.

The Museum of to-day which seeks to justify its existence must present all of the three phases of activity above mentioned, namely acquisition, preservation and education, and conditions of the present and future demand emphasis on the last. The up-to-date museums are not content to be "dungeons of the ideal" as Gustave Geoffrey, the French critic, called the museums of Paris, but differ from them in that their duty is through service. That such has been the dream of museum authorities is illustrated in the remark of Edward Forbes, who said long ago that "the great purpose of museums is to stimulate the observant powers into action. The educational value of museums will be in exact proportion to their powers of awakening new thoughts in the mind."

The Bulletin of the
Rhode Island School of Design
Providence

All communications should be addressed to the General Editor, Mr. L. Earle Rowe.

Entered as second-class matter January 16, 1913, at the post office at Providence, Rhode Island, under the Act of August 24, 1912.

ADMISSIONS.

Hours of Opening.— The galleries are open to the public on every day of the year, with the exception of Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, and the Fourth of July. From July 1st to September 15th the hours are from 1 to 5 P. M. on week days and from 2 to 5 P. M. Sundays; from September 15th to July 1st the hours are from 10 A. M. to 5 P. M. week days and from 2 to 5 P. M. Sundays. The Pendleton Collection is open from 2 to 5 P. M. daily.

Twenty-five cents admission to the museum is charged on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and the museum is free on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays.

Free transferable tickets admitting four persons on pay-days are sent to all members of the corporation. Art students and artists, on application to the authorities, may obtain free tickets of admission for pay-day. Teachers with pupils of both public and private schools will be admitted without payment upon application.

PHOTOGRAPHS ON SALE.

Photographic copies of many of the objects belonging to the museum, including photographs of the Pendleton Collection of furniture, are on sale at the entrance to the museum.

PUBLICATIONS.

Four quarterly bulletins and a yearbook are to be issued and are sent free of charge to the members, and, on written request, to alumni of the institution.

The "Catalogue of the Memorial Exhibition of Works of Art given by Isaac Comstock Bates" will be forwarded to any address for twenty-five cents. A copy will gladly be sent on application to any of the subscribers of the School of Design who have not as yet received their copy.

COPYING.

Permission to copy or photograph in the galleries of the museum may be obtained in the office. Such permits will not be issued for Sundays or legal holidays.

LIBRARY.

The Library contains 2,378 volumes, 13,135 mounted photographs and reproductions, 600 lantern slides, and about 940 postcards. During the months of June, July and August the library is closed.