THE SILVERSMITH'S ART:
THE THIRTEENTH, FOURTEENTH AND FIFTEENTH CENTURIES. BY JEAN SCHOPFER. TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY IRENE SARGENT.

The Editors of The Craftsman regard themselves as peculiarly fortunate in being able to offer to their readers the extended history of the silversmith’s art in Europe, with special reference to France, written by the distinguished Parisian critic, Mr. Jean Schopfer. The series began in the November issue with a profusely illustrated review of the beautiful ecclesiastical work of the twelfth century. The present paper, the second of the proposed four, is of even deeper interest than the first; since it deals with a great architectural period, the thirteenth century, which influenced to the furtherance of strength and beauty, the adjunct and lesser arts. The third and fourth divisions of the subject, yet to be published, treat respectively the silversmith’s art in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the work of our own time.

The statements of M. Schopfer, it is needless to say, are most authoritative. The information thus collated by him has hitherto existed, hidden and fragmentary, in rare and costly books. His treatment of the subject is characterized by the grace, accuracy and delicacy which are attained only by long and careful studies pursued in a sympathetic environment, and with a purpose quite apart from that which animates the hastily formed art critic whose highest aim is financial success.

In rendering M. Schopfer’s studies into English, the translator keenly regrets the necessary loss of some portion of the verbal beauty of the original, as also the absence of an English equivalent for the French word orfèvrerie, which, although derived from the Latin aurus (gold) and facio (to make), applies equally to work in gold and in silver, and avoids the paraphrase which a translator is forced to employ.

As we have already indicated in our preceding article, the art of the worker in the precious metals changes with the thirteenth century: it can not exist side by side with its opulent and imposing neighbor, architecture, without borrowing from it.

Let us examine the characteristics of the thirteenth century in the domain of art. We find first the expansion of pointed (Gothic) architecture, which dates from the first half of the twelfth century. At this period, throughout France, there arose churches and cathedrals constructed according to the new formula. Secondly, we find the complete, perfected development of ornamental statuary. Here, again, the point of departure is the twelfth century. The portals of the cathedrals of Moissac, of Vezelay, of Autun, show the direction which the thirteenth century was destined to follow. Then, later, we have the incomparable masterpieces of statuary offered by Notre Dame, Paris, and by the cathedrals
of Reims, Amiens, Bourges and Chartres. We find the same characteristics in the art of the silversmith. It becomes architectural in the sense that it copies more accurately churches and chapels. Furthermore, statuary, properly speaking,—that is, the representation of the human form and face,—acquires a new and considerable importance. The art of the worker in the precious metals becomes, as it were, an extension of sculpture. It produces real masterpieces which, with equal justice, can be included in the history of the silversmith’s art and in that of sculpture. As an example, among the masterpieces may be cited the silver figure of the Blessed Virgin from the treasury of Saint Denis, which is now preserved in the Louvre.

Together with the representation of the human figure, that of the animal becomes frequent. We no longer meet beautiful works of pure metal-work, like the cross of Clairmarais at Saint-Omer, the reliquary of Bar-sur-Aube, or the reliquary of Charroux, in which silver scroll- and filigree-work surround incrustcd precious stones, thus forming a whole of extreme decorative richness.

Another reliquary from Charroux, but one of a later century, shows the advance made by the silversmith’s art, as well as its new tendencies. It is a beautiful object, but one quite different from the works which we have already studied. Set upon a highly decorated base, a circular chapel rises, having small towers and crocketed gables which are supported upon small, slender columns, as we find this detail in the cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris. Four statuettes of saints or monks, in picturesque attitude, support a little edifice containing the relics. The piece, therefore, partakes at once of both architecture and sculpture. And if our readers will refer to our preced-
ing article, and compare this work of the thirteenth century with the twelfth century reliquary which we have there represented, the objects themselves will explain more clearly than pages of commentary could do, the distinctive taste and style of each period.

If it be permitted to the historian to pass judgment, I must hasten to add that the three centuries about to be reviewed in the present article possess a liberty, an imaginative quality, a richness of invention which are surprising, and that the critic placed in presence of the works of this period, finds them so charming, so graceful and so delicately executed, that he accepts them without reservation.

These works, like those previously examined, belong to the religious department of the silversmith’s art. The works of the secular division have not been able to resist the political and economic vicissitudes of five centuries. It is greatly to be regretted that nothing has been preserved of the collections of Charles Fifth, or of the rich treasures of his brother, the duke of Anjou; that the Swiss, after the battles of Morat and Grandson, let perish the superb objects in gold and silver work belonging to Charles the Bold, duke of Burgundy, the richest prince of his time in entire Europe. Of all these beautiful creations nothing remains. For silver and gold objects have always been threatened with sudden destruction, since, independently of their artistic worth, they possess an intrinsic value estimated in weight, which is immediately realizable. From this fact it resulted that a prince whose purse was empty, could not resist the temptation of providing himself with money, by causing his silver plate to be melted. We shall witness later, under Louis XIV. and Louis XV., the stupid destructions to which these princes resort with meagre result.

II. The Samson Reliquary; transitional style; Cathedral of Reims, France.
In the Middle Ages coin was rare. The fortune of a prince, of a noble, of a rich merchant, often consisted largely in his plate. If he had surplus money, he ordered the execution of a silver table service, or an ewer. If he needed money, he ordered the melting of certain pieces chosen from the ornaments of his dressers; making such choice without regard to the artistic value of the objects destined to destruction. Therefore, when evil times came, and they came often, the treasures of the gold- and silversmith’s art disappeared.

To ensure a standard, and unvariable value to these works, it was necessary for gold and silver to possess an absolute value which could not be modified by the smiths themselves. If these latter had been left free to act, they would shortly have produced works in which the proportion of silver or gold would have been insignificant. But the very vigorous statutes which governed the guild of the gold- and silversmiths (which statutes we shall treat later), provided that the workers were obliged always to use the purest quality of gold and silver. And these strict measures of supervision were enacted in order to
IV. Virgin and child in silver repoussé; Louvre, Paris
leave no room for the least possible fraud.

These facts show the reason why mediæval work in the precious metals designed for secular uses has practically disappeared. We have, therefore, to confine our examination to objects devoted to religious service. But even of these many examples have failed to escape the ravages of time and of enemies. The Revolution, indeed, destroyed a certain number of pieces. But it must be confessed that the kings were infinitely more destructive than the revolutionary spirits, and that even under the most pious rulers, gold and silver objects devoted to religious uses were not respected when the need of money grew insistent. When Richard Coeur de Lion had been captured by the Saracens, his ransom was placed at one hundred fifty, or two hundred thousand marks silver, and the rich abbeys knew to their sorrow what sacrifice of their treasures was occasioned by this misfortune. When Saint Louis was made prisoner during his Crusade, no less than eight hundred thousand besants of gold were necessary to release him from the hands of the heathen. Such ransoms were disastrous for the gold and silver work existing in both France and England.

Nevertheless, we have remaining a considerable number of specimens of each of the three centuries with which we are now to deal.

We have already mentioned the reliquary of Charroux, a most characteristic work of the thirteenth century. Our second illustration is the so-called reliquary of Samson, preserved in the Cathedral of Reims. This example, on the contrary, is a work of the
transition period, in which we recognize the greater number of the characteristics of the twelfth century: incrusted stones, filigree, and applied ornaments in silver. It has a foothold in both centuries, the stronger being in the twelfth.

The reliquary in the form of a triptych, originally from the Abbey of Floreffe and now belonging to the Rothschild collection in the Museum of the Louvre, is, on the contrary, an excellent and most important example of the thirteenth century (Plate III). It is of Flemish workmanship, and, without doubt, the most significant production of the time and place. Two angels support the cross. The wings of the triptych show scenes from the life of Christ: the Crucifixion, the Descent from the Cross, the Holy Women, other personages and angels. Here, as I have already observed, the work of the silversmith resembles that of the sculptor. The qualities of the sculptor were required for the chiseling of these exquisite figures. The style of the draperies is excellent, worthy of the time, which is a period of culmination. The ornament is of extreme richness, and the object as a whole in one of the mediaeval masterpieces of the goldsmith’s art.

From this time onward a great importance was given to shrines and reliquaries. They became monuments in miniature. Around the central portion containing the relics, there appeared scenes from the life of the saint so honored, and in these scenes the figures were executed in high relief. We
have descriptions of large shrines made to receive the relics of Saint Louis, at the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century. They were ornamented with very numerous figures of saints and apostles, as well as of the kings and princesses who were the donors of these marvellous works of art. Portraiture entered into metal work and into sculpture at the same time. The corporation of the gold- and silversmiths was among the strongest of the civic bodies. The Virgin in silver repoussé formerly belonging to the treasury of the Abbey of Saint Denis and now in the Museum of the Louvre (Plate IV.), shows at once the perfection of workmanship and the exquisite development which the plastic sentiment attained in the Middle Ages. But one fact regarding the piece must be confessed. There is no reason why this work should be in silver, rather than in marble and ivory. That is: it is a work of pure sculpture. But owing to the material in which it is executed, we have the right to treat it here, and to rank it among the masterpieces of the metal worker’s art.

It belongs to the beginning of the fourteenth century. We have its exact date. It was executed in 1339, at the command of the queen, Jeanne d’Evreux. Without the date, the style alone would suffice to fix the epoch of the work. It belongs to the fourteenth century by the slight symmetry caused by the projection of one hip of the Virgin; by the caressing and charming gesture of the Christ-child who lays his hand upon the lips of his mother; by the length of the draperies, of which the folds are broken at the ground-line; by the slight inclination of the Virgin’s head: all characteristic of the fourteenth century and of this period alone. But the object has neither the affecta-
tion nor the complexity, nor a certain dryness that one sees too often arise in the works of this time. On the contrary, it preserves the perfect distinction of line, the pure grace, the simplicity, which impart to the works of this period an imperishable aroma. The face of the Virgin, radiant with tender goodness, is that of a mother of the period. It was among the people that the sculptor found his models. It was in the depths of the sentiments which all shared and which made of Europe a whole constituting what was named Christendom that the artist sought his inspiration. He had no desire to appropriate to himself beauty foreign and dead. The dream of restoring antiquity,—a deceptive dream which the Renascence was to pursue,—had not as yet arisen. There was a secret harmony between the artists and those for whom he wrought. The former found in themselves all that was sure to please the people. There was no effort, no pedantry, no archaism. As Viollet-le-Duc has said, the works of that period looked neither backward nor forward. All lasting works of art, whether antique and Greek, whether mediaeval, or modern, have always addressed themselves to the present times which produce them.

The special characteristic of the statuette of the Virgin under consideration, the characteristic which makes it relevant to our present subject, is the material in which it is wrought. This material—silver—enabled the artist to give an exquisite finish to the work: the draperies are finely sculptured in concave lines, the face and the hair are rendered with extreme delicacy, and if we were to compare this figure with an ivory Virgin of the same period, the differences in execution, resulting from the difference in material, would be very marked in favor of the silver statuette.

Following, we have a series of crosses (Plates V., VI. and VII.). The treasuries of our cathedrals and churches still possess a considerable number of these objects

IX. German wine tankard; Museum of Lubeck
which might afford excellent models for ecclesiastical metal work in our own time. We find there different methods of treatment. But the favorite process of all was that of hammering the metal over a matrix (repoussé). The workshops of the Middle Ages kept thus matrices of a certain number of models for the more usual objects: vases, cups, basins, ewers. The silver in a thin sheet was hammered (repoussé) over the hard form; then, it was further worked with the chisel and the graving-tool. Retouching and finishing at this time were very important. By these means the workman gave to the object a personal character, which, in a measure, re-created it. As I have previously said, the expenditure of time was not considered in the Middle Ages. In this respect there was no exercise of economy.

If thus the art of the worker in precious metals allied itself on the one hand with sculpture, it did not the less preserve its own domain. We illustrate, as an example of purely decorative metal work (Plate VIII.), a superb belt and buckle of German origin, which date from the end of the fourteenth century. Throughout the Middle Ages, Germany excelled in metal work, and the history of bronze in particular can not be written without involving the special study of the German masterpieces.

Another specimen of German workmanship (Plate IX.) is of much later origin, since it belongs to the sixteenth century. But in Germany the line of demarcation between the Middle Ages and the Renascence is much less sharply defined than in France and in Italy. Throughout the sixteenth, and even during the seventeenth century, the mediaeval series of objects for ordinary
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a dragon with yawning throat. The beak of the jug is also composed of a fantastic animal. The dragon, as is well known, played a most important part in the decorative art of the Middle Ages, beginning with the earliest times of that period. In the popular imagination, it had a real, animate existence. It appears in works of the plastic arts, strong, muscular, scaled and frightful. In modern art, it has become lymphatic and sluggish. It swells and pants, but it can no longer terrify. In the plastic sense it has lost all force, all energy. We no longer believe in the evil powers and the existence of fantastic animal types, and the abortive attempts of contemporary decorative art will not renew in us the terrors which have faded from our minds.

uses were continued. The love of the old forms was preserved. The wine tankard here reproduced, which exists in the Museum of Lubeck, shows a singular mingling of Teutonic thought, mediaeval taste, and free imagination, united with certain memories of the antique, found in the scrolls of foliage encircling the expansion of the cup. With the exception of this ornament, the composition as a whole and the decorative details are altogether in the style of the Middle Ages: possessing that richness and exuberance which sometimes, even often, in German works, injure the principal lines and mar the precision of the swell.

The German jug of the Museum of Goslar (Plate X.) has greater refinement. The open-work decoration is of extreme delicacy; figures mingle with foliage, and beneath the little spires that crown the piece, a bold rider is mounted upon a prancing horse. The handle of the jug is formed by
Thoroughly French, restrained and without ornament, we find the cruets which are preserved in the chapel of the Hôtel Dieu, at Reims (Plate XI). It possesses a charming simplicity of form and a rare grace of flexible line. As we examine it, we regret that our modern coffee-pots do not possess the same pleasing contours.

The Middle Ages believed in saints and relics. There were few churches without the honored possession of miracle-working remembrances of holy personages. To ensure their preservation the clergy and people commissioned the workers in precious metals to execute beautiful receptacles, and thus the religious fervor of Christians has handed down to us exquisite examples of the
silversmith’s skill. And in no other department of art do we find the then prevailing liberty of invention better instanced than in these same objects. A case in point resides in the reliquary arms (Plate XII), contained in Saint Peter’s church at Varzy. A considerable number of such objects, similar in form, are still extant. As might be supposed, they contain a portion of the arms of a saint. Those shown in our illustration date from the thirteenth century, and preserve, to a certain degree, the appearance of works of the preceding century. We find here precious stones incrusted and uncut, as we have so often seen them, and, upon the right arm we see scrolls of filigree work. The gesture of the hand extended in benediction is dignified and imposing.

The Church of Auribeau has preserved a reliquary of the beginning of the fourteenth century, which is of a beautiful, pure style (Plate XIII). The base is bold and admirable. Here attention should be directed to the fine relief shown in the moldings decorating mediaeval works. The concaves are deep, and the convex portions well accentuated. With these the moldings upon modern works offer a contrast to their own detriment. They are uniformly flat. We have lost the taste for the pronounced profiles distinguishing the structural productions of the Middle Ages. And this is a general characteristic observed not alone in our metal work, but also in our furniture, and in the decoration of stone, plaster and wood. In mediaeval times, and down to the middle of the seventeenth century, craftsmen handled their material vigorously. Shadows are strong and accents vigorous.

The same features are shown in the monstrance and the chalice of the church of Saint Sauveur (Plate XIV.) ; the first of which belongs to the fourteenth, and the second to the thirteenth century. The chalice is remarkable by the clear distinction of its parts, by its elegance of contour and by the purity of the composition as a whole. Between this chalice and the cups manufactured by modern silversmiths for prizes in athletic contests an instructive comparison might be instituted.

To terminate this rapid review of the silversmith’s art in the Middle Ages we shall illustrate three important works, respectively of the thirteenth, fourteenth and
XV. Shrine of Saint Taurin: thirteenth century; Evreux, France
fifteenth century, which epitomize to some degree the tendencies of art during these three important centuries.

The first of these is the celebrated shrine of Saint Taurin, at Evreux (Plate XV.). It is in the most ornate, richest and most sumptuous style of the thirteenth century. It would seem as if the maker of this beautiful piece had wished to offer an example of the various methods of treatment in which the silversmiths of that period excelled. The general plan is that of a church, with great doors, buttresses surmounted by finely composed pinnacles, and a spire. We find here again the incrusted stones, the filigree scroll-work of the twelfth century; also, silver placques, engraved and in niello work, delicate leaves applied to the background, in fact, a whole sturdy, light and graceful system of plant-forms which bloom upon the arches and twine about the great volutes, like convolvuli around a branch. Finally, as prescribed in the thirteenth century, the shrine is completed by figures in the round and by bas-reliefs representing the saint and scenes from his life. Here, all that is statuesque is excellent, with no lingering trace of awkwardness or inexperience, and shows a truly perfected style. This shrine is indeed a finished example, marking the culminating point attained by the silversmith’s art in the thirteenth century.

The reliquary of Sainte Aldegonde (Plate XVI.), at Maubeuge, is a charming work of the fourteenth century. It is a marvel of grace and elegance, and very characteristic of the art of this period. It has not the distinction and dignity of the shrine of Saint Taurin. It is tall and slender, light, delicate. The two angels that support the reliquary proper are attractive and typical figures. Their heavy vestments fall in elongated folds over their feet; they are half kneeling, and their bodies appear tense, supple and sinewy. This piece is a lovely flower of the art of the Middle Ages.

The last example is a monstrance of the fifteenth century, found in the Museum of the Louvre (Plate XVII.). It is certainly less perfect and complete than the two preceding works. But it is still an excellent architectural composition. It has beside the merit of recalling to us, as we are about to leave the three centuries which we have studied in our present article, one of the characteristics of mediaeval art which I indicated at the beginning of our study: that is, the loan made by the art of the silversmith from architectural forms, and the taste for the erection of miniature chapels which were executed with an extreme care and minuteness reaching to the smallest details.

We now approach the Renascence, the beginning of modern times, the opening of the period during which the arts, fine and decorative, have suffered the most serious crises. It is necessary before we leave the centuries that we have just now studied, to cast upon them a retrospective and sweeping glance. This glance will provoke the question:

What lesson can the artisans of the Middle Ages teach us modern men who wish to prepare a future better and brighter, a more abundant life for the decorative arts, which shall thus reassert in the lives of our children the place lost by them so many generations since?

I have said artisans. The word artist did not exist. Furthermore, we apply the
XVI. Reliquary of Sainte Aldegonde, Maubeuge, France
noble term of artist to him alone who devotes himself to pure art, that is, to the painter, the sculptor, or the musician. The men of the Middle Ages did not possess the word. But they owned the thing itself. The second is more important than the first.

The comparison between our decorative art and that of the Middle Ages is very humiliating for us, who boast nevertheless of belonging to a highly civilized period and speak scornfully of the barbarity and the darkness of mediaevalism.

It is, however, necessary to understand that one of the strongest reasons for the excellence of the mediaeval arts lay in the organization of work which was altogether different from the system obtaining in our own day.

The workers in the precious metals, in common with all other artisans, formed a corporation, and they alone who were members of this body possessed the right to fashion objects in gold and silver. This provision constituted a privilege which, according to our modern ideas, was harmful to society, since it prevented all liberty of trade. But the privilege possessed by the corporation entailed corresponding duties. The corporation was inspired as if by a sense of common and personal honor, and it exerted every effort to maintain a standard excellence of production. Thus, there resulted a strict constitution of laws to which all members were subject. I have already alluded to the rules which governed the alloy of the precious metals, in my statement that the corporation permitted the use of gold and silver only in the purest state compatible with effective work. In order to facilitate supervision, the furnaces of the gold- and silversmiths could be placed in their public shops only. They could not melt their metal in a rear workshop or
cellar. Furthermore, the period of apprenticeship and of "companionship" was strictly fixed. And this period accomplished, the aspirant became a master, upon presenting to the corporation a work created with the view of proving that he understood thoroughly the trade which he was about to exercise in the capacity of an expert.

I do not believe that the jurors to whom such works were submitted were greatly preoccupied with questions of pure art. What they demanded principally of an object was that it should be technically perfect. There are in all trades honest methods and processes, which are more or less slow, difficult and costly. There is, on the other hand, what may be termed juggling or tricking the difficulty. The exclusive use of the best and most honest methods was demanded from those who presented themselves as candidates for the mastership. The fraternity taught respect for the trade which it represented.

In modern workshops these principles are scarcely understood. Labor is so regulated that the smallest object passes through the hands of ten workmen, each of whom has his specialty. The drawing is made by the chief designer, who is confined to his paper and who would be quite unable to execute the thing which he conceives. Machines produce the desired object which is scarcely retouched, except to receive cleansing and polish. The results of such methods speak for themselves.

In the Middle Ages the artisan loved his trade, and when he set his hand to an object, he finished it himself; devoting to it the time necessary to its completion and perfection.

The art of the future can not be made the subject of prophecy. But I feel, I know well, that we can never possess a decorative art worthy of the name, until we shall have formed a new class of artisans who shall be inspired by the respect and the love of their trade. For such conditions time is necessary. But we see clearly the end before us. Of what import is the time spent in its attainment? The essential point is to reach it.

A beautiful work, falling outside the period and the scope of M. Schopfer's article, but nevertheless recalled by his writing and illustrations, is the reliquary preserved in the Chapel of the Holy Blood, at Bruges, Belgium. It was executed by a Flemish artisan, Jan Crabbe, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, but it shows the style of a much earlier date. It is wrought in silver-gilt, and has the form of a Gothic chapel, like many of the French reliquaries described by M. Schopfer. It is ornamented something after the manner of a Milan cathedral in miniature, with statues of saints and angels set upon the roofs and pinnacles. These small figures are of solid gold, and a large number of costly gems are set along the base and in other portions of the work. The stones are very characteristic of the times, and consist largely of rubies and emeralds; these jewels are uncut and set in heavy bands of gold. It is one of the richest of reliquaries, and it is honored by a special festival occurring annually on the first Sunday after the second of May, when it is carried in solemn procession through the streets of the city; the festival constituting the most brilliant period of the year in the old town which has received the name of Bruges the dead.