

SÁNDOR MIHALIK



OLD HUNGARIAN ENAMEL

Sommer, the goldsmith of Brassó (now Braşov, Rumania), who died in 1673. According to contemporary records, he not only travelled in Germany, Holland, England, Sweden and France, but also "journied eastward as far as the sea at Constantinople."

#### PAINTED ENAMELS

The last of the classical techniques to be employed in Hungary was painted enamels, an art in which the goldsmith is, to all effects, supplanted by the miniature-painter. Here, the metal plates, having first been cut to the required size, are coated with a uniform layer of enamel, which is then "fired," thus providing a fixed ground to which the enamel painting or design can be applied. Thus, unlike the earlier techniques, it does not necessarily demand a mastery of the ancient and noble craft of the goldsmith. Moreover, since the painted enamel plaques were, especially in the period of decline, often purchased ready-made from a different workshop, and only then used by the goldsmith for purposes of decoration, the results lacked the individual integrity of works of art.

The process originated abroad and attained its fullest expression in the work of German goldsmiths. In Hungary, where it made a modest start in the 17th century in the form of floral motifs, its development was at first restricted by the great popularity of Transylvanian enamels, though its novelty exerted a certain influence on the latter technique. It resulted in the workers in Transylvanian enamel abandoning the use of separate metal bands to outline their designs (see above p. 29); while at the same time considerable increasing their reliance on over-painting.

In the second half of the 17th century the use of painted enamel plaques for decorative purposes was mainly practised

in the workshop of the goldsmith Bertalan Weigl at Selmecebánya (now Banská Štiavnica, Czechoslovakia). The covered chalice he made for the local Lutheran church was ornamented with painted enamel plaques, some of which depicted mines, while others were allegorical representations of Faith, Hope and Charity. The cover of another chalice, executed for the Lutheran church at Lőcse (now Levoča, Czechoslovakia), was decorated with landscapes in painted enamel, and the body of the chalice with medallions of saints.

By the end of the 17th century Hungarian goldsmiths' work had undergone substantial changes. The Habsburgs, losing their hold in the West, moved the centres of power of their empire eastwards. In 1686, after a century and a half of foreign occupation, Buda, once the city of Sigismund of Luxembourg and Matthias Corvinus, was liberated by the united forces of Christendom; and it was not long before the Turks were expelled from the rest of the occupied area as well. Once again the impoverished Hungarian country, devastated and robbed of her artistic treasures, was able to resume the cultural ties that bound her to Europe. This was the period when French baroque was the dominant influence throughout Europe, and it was not long before it made itself felt in the work of Hungarian goldsmiths. At first it was transmitted by Austrian and German craftsmen, but later a direct connection with France was established.

With the liberation a host of works by Czech, Austrian and German goldsmiths poured into the country, most of them decorated with painted enamel, to find their way to the altars of Hungarian churches and cathedral treasuries. And, in the measure of their ability, Hungarian goldsmiths, too, joined in this work of restoration. Under the influence of the numerous foreign works now available to them, they began to produce

small painted enamels, usually landscapes or figures, executed for the most part on a metal base previously coated with white enamel.

The greatest and most representative Hungarian exponent of painted enamel was undoubtedly the goldsmith János Szilassy. It was at Kassa that he first learned his craft from his father, György Szilassy, though he did not remain there. He moved to Lőcse, a town then in the northern part of the country, where, in 1729, he was admitted to the Goldsmiths' Guild; and where, more than half a century later, in 1782, he was to die. His activities were not to be confined within the limits of a small town, however, and today examples of his work may be seen in places to the east of Nyitra, and as far south of Lőcse as the town of Arad, in that part of the country that now belongs to Rumania.

Altogether nearly a hundred pieces known to be by him—ciboria, chalices, crucifixes and reliquaries—have come down to us. In most cases the painted enamels with which they are decorated represent scenes taken from the Bible, though sometimes he would choose a secular subject, as in the case of the chalice he made in 1751 for the Great Church of Lőcse. Here the enamel plaque depicts the terrible fire of 1747, in which some three hundred houses and other buildings in the town were completely gutted. Szilassy himself was present at this scene of devastation, and his painting, which shows the main square of the town with the Church of Saint James, the Town Hall and a few houses in the background all ablaze, has the actuality of an eye-witness account. This shows that he was by no means simply a craftsman, relying on foreign inspiration and content to copy the work of others, but a prolific and original artist working direct from nature.

On 1st September, 1769, the City Council of Kassa asked the authorities in Lőcse to invite Szilassy, who—*perfecta artis suae cognitione reliques in circumvicinia existentes longe antecellit*—to prepare, on their behalf, a design and estimate for a monstrance for their cathedral. This was the fiftieth anniversary of the day when Szilassy had been bound apprentice to his father, the goldsmith of Kassa, and during these fifty years he had become an honoured master in his craft, the creator of many masterpieces. This latest commission, however, was a gratifying recognition of his achievement, and he accepted it with enthusiasm, determined to produce a masterpiece which would give expression to a lifetime's proficiency. In less than a year the work was completed as proved by a document dated 2nd August, 1770. He himself described his most important work in the following words :

“On the large cross at the top of the monstrance are representations of God the Father and of the Holy Ghost, together with three historical pictures and six small angels. Framed in the central garland are the scene of the Last Supper, four historical paintings, two large angels, 139 enamelled flowers and 64 green leaves, with two small labels around the Last Supper.

“The pedestal is ornamented with four pictures, twelve angels, and 387 semi-precious stones.

“Above the figure of the Holy Ghost is one large diamond and a smaller one, while the ‘globe of the world’ is set with nine diamonds. The triangular tablet of God the Father is set with nine rubies, the *lunula* with eight, and at the bottom are two more.” (Plates 47 and 48)

It is not only from these painted enamel plaques decorating the Kassa monstrance, but from his whole *œuvre*, that one is able to appreciate with what taste and moderation he succeeded

in merging the baroque and the rococo styles in a graceful and disciplined art. Szilassy was one of the last master-goldsmiths of Hungary, able to apply the varied techniques of his craft with consummate skill and a sobriety that always avoided exaggeration. With him, the ancient art of Hungarian enamel-work achieved its final flowering.

By the end of the 18th century the decline was already serious. Not only was Hungary engulfed in the Napoleonic wars that swept across Europe, but the rapid spread of machine-made goods was beginning to challenge the supremacy of the goldsmith. In vain did the creative human spirit create masterpieces: the increasing perfection of the products of the machine, coupled with their comparative cheapness, gradually overcame all competition. The work of János Szilassy at the end of the 18th century proved to be the swan-song of the enamellers' art, with all its proven values and ancient virtues. Though attempts have been made to revive it, so far no one has proved himself to be a worthy successor to the great artist-craftsmen of the past. This delicate, multicoloured flower of Hungarian craftsmanship has withered, and the skilled proficiency of our goldsmiths in this ancient art has become a thing of the past.

39  
Covered Goblet  
with Transylvanian  
enamel  
(17th century)







44  
Goblet with  
Transylvanian  
painted enamel  
(late 17th century)