

# ICOM-CC 6th Experts' Meeting Enamel on Metal Conservation



## Extended abstracts

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The following papers were edited by the coordinator and represent the research presented at the Experts' Meeting on Enamel on Metal Conservation, at the National Museum in Warsaw, 19-20<sup>th</sup> May 2016. The papers are listed by programme session topic and in order of presentation, except for the posters, presented at the end of the book. In the table of contents only the name of the authors present during the meeting are listed, whereas in the abstract all authors are cited.

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Figure 1  
Reliquary casket of Saint Valerie. Obverse.  
Museo Catedral de Orense, Spain

## The Saint Valerie and Saint Stephen Limoges enamelled reliquary caskets in Ourense Cathedral

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### Introduction

In June 1998 three small enamelled caskets were found in the altar of Ourense Cathedral. These were found inside a large chest devoted to Saint Euphemia, along with some other carved and embossed boxes that were of different sizes and materials (copper, wood and bone). Their existence was hitherto unknown.

In this extended abstract I will focus on two documented Limoges enamelled reliquary caskets devoted to Saint Stephen and Saint Valerie. These objects are currently kept in the Ourense Cathedral museum. They are small, rectangular reliquary caskets that contain a number of bundles with numerous small relics of saints who so far have not been identified, with the exception of some small remains belonging to Saint Adrian, Saint Eulalia and Saint Sebastian.

We do not know how these objects came to be inside the casket. The first references to enamelled objects in the Ourense Cathedral date from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and come from the chronicler of King Felipe II, Ambrosio de Morales, who was sent to check on and make an inventory of the historical and artistic heritage of the kingdoms of León and Galicia. His visit to the Ourense Cathedral has left us evidence that it housed "*many small relics placed into most ancient well-crafted enamel caskets, though everything is mixed up because the titles that were in tiny scrolls have fallen out of the bundles.*" (Morales 1576). It is possible that this description corresponds to the Limoges enamel caskets found in the high altar of the Ourense Cathedral, one of which shows the martyrdom of Saint Valerie and the other the stoning of Saint Stephen.

### The reliquary casket of Saint Valerie

This casket is small, rectangular (13.5 x 12.5 x 6 cm), with a wooden core, covered with champlevé enamelled and gilt copper plaques and appliqué heads (Fig. 1 and 2). It is engraved, chiselled and gilded, with a two-sided top. It is mounted on four prismatic supports. The original cresting has not survived. The casket has a door on the lower back side, on which the drilled holes of a lock can be seen.



Figure 2 - Chest of Saint Valerie. Reverse.  
Museo Catedral de Orense, Spain



Figure 3 - Chest of Saint Stephen. Obverse.

It is in fairly good condition, though there are gaps in the enamelling on the reverse and repainting work on the bordering along the side gables. The colour palette used is blue (dark, medium and light) for the backgrounds, turquoise for the strips and green, yellow, red and white for the ornamentation.

The larger side of the casket presents the most traditional and dramatic scene of the martyrdom of Saint Valerie. This is the episode that was most commonly represented and disseminated by Limoges artisans from the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (François 1999). Valerie is considered to be the protomartyr of Aquitaine and her life appears linked to that of Saint Martial, the first bishop of Limoges.

The scene of the martyrdom appears on the front part of the casket on two levels. It is intended to be read from left to right and from top to bottom. The legend has it that Valerie, daughter of the Governor of Aquitaine, was sentenced to death after rejecting marriage to Duke Esteban de Tève. The upper part depicts her beheading and the moment when the executioner cuts her head off with a sword in the presence of an unknown character, who observes the scene with a gesture of pain, his left hand brought to his head and his right pointing to the act. To the right is a flowering tree and a mound, reminding us that the scene occurred outside according to the legend (Fig. 1).

The episode of the cephalophore miracle is shown in the lower part. Saint Valerie, having been decapitated, kneels in front of Saint Martial, who was officiating at the altar of Limoges Cathedral, and gives him her head before the astonished face of the executioner who tries to keep his sword in its sheath. The hand of God emerges from a cloud, blessing the scene.

On the back of the piece a folding door opens up. The decoration is geometric on an orthogonal frame, enclosed by thick bands of turquoise that frame four-leaf clovers with red stamens, the petals of which alternate between yellow and blue-white. There are two plates on both sides of the door, decorated with a wavy decoration and a continuation of the bordering of crosses that frames the entire piece (Fig. 2).

The side gables show two haloed figures standing under an arcade. They are dressed in tunics and capes, each holding a book. They stand out against a paradisiacal background that is ornamented with rosettes.

The graphics of the figures etched and in reserve display a simple but elegant implementation that contrasts with the fluidity of the folding of the clothing of some of the characters who are moving in a dance-like way. This type of piece responds to a type of Limousin style of production series, which was based in Limoges during the first quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and spread widely.

### The reliquary casket of Saint Stephen

This reliquary casket has a prismatic structure with gable roof (Fig. 3). It is topped with a cresting of openwork horseshoe arches and three spherical appendages. It contains many small bundles that house small relics of saints, some of them with the saint's name, a testament to their holiness.

The wooden interior that forms the structure of the casket is covered by eight copper plaques (one is missing) with champlevé enamelling. There are chiselled and gilt figures in reserve, with appliqué heads. The colour palette

used includes navy blue for the background, turquoise for the horizontal strips and a wide colour range (green, yellow, red, white and light blue) for the plant ornamentation and edges, in various juxtapositions. It is in good condition, although there are gaps in the enamelling on the reverse and a plate on the reverse is missing.

The iconographic programme is executed in two parts that provide a brief account of the martyrdom of Saint Stephen: the stoning in the lower part and burial in the upper. It fits around a narration of the biblical text of the Acts of the Apostles. The stoning scene takes place on a background decorated with cross-shaped rosettes. The saint is kneeling in a static posture. The mound under his knees suggests a rocky place. All this contrasts with the dynamism of the executioners, which is reflected by the movement of their legs and the contortions of their bodies as they throw stones. The position of the feet, invading the strip that hosts the composition, contrasts with the immobility and static posture of the Holy Martyr, who while kneeling raises his hands toward a God who blesses his attitude and creates a slight depth of field. The cover of the box represents the Holy burial scene. His body is placed inside a sarcophagus, richly decorated with geometric elements, by two kneeling acolytes. A haloed figure, with a staff and dalmatic, officiates the obsequies of the deceased, giving absolution.

On the side gables, under an arch topped by a bell tower, haloed figures who are standing barefoot are carrying a book and stand out against a blue background crossed by two turquoise strips.

The reverse onto which a door opens, presents a very original form of gridded geometric ornamentation on an orthogonal grid delimited by squares of cobalt blue, framing three rows of polychrome rosettes inscribed in gold medallions that are superimposed on the box and its roof. There is an alternation between zigzagged flowers: red-green-yellow and red-blue-white. They are distributed in three rows on the bottom plate and in two for the box's cover. The floral field is bound by a border of small crosses.

The execution as well as the dancing silhouettes and the appliqué heads in a classical style suggest a type of Limousin production series that was made at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and was possibly widely distributed through the pilgrimage routes.

### Conclusion

The presence of Limousin craftsmanship in the Ourense Cathedral could be explained not only through the desire to link the Ourense see to the great pilgrimage routes for the purposes of circulating and exchanging sumptuous objects, but also through the desire to have relics of saints' bodies as *foci* for worship and devotion, which was an important consideration for a cathedral in the Middle Ages. The promoter of such an ambitious enterprise was Bishop Don Alfonso, who at this time occupied the see of Ourense (1174–1213). To reinforce ecclesiastical dignity, not only did he supply important relics such as those of Saint Martin of Tours (patron saint of Ourense Cathedral), but he also ordered sumptuous reliquaries to host them. The attempt of linking the Ourense see to the main pilgrimage routes can be seen in the fact that the caskets feature on the one hand representations of Saint Valerie, protomartyr

of Limoges, with Bishop Saint Martial, evangeliser of Aquitaine and the first bishop of Limoges, and on the other Saint Stephen, another Limousin saint.

What we have here is therefore Limousin work intended for a local clientele. This testifies to the spread of devotion along the pilgrimage routes and highlights the importance of the relationships maintained between the Ourense and Limoges prelatures in around the first third of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Similar pieces with the same iconography can be found in Germany, Austria, Spain, France, Italy, Poland and the United States.

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