

Widener's Decorative Arts

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NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON, D. C.

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In the recent gift from Mr. Joseph E. Widener, the National Gallery has received not only a large number of important paintings and sculpture, but also objects of the decorative arts sufficient to fill nine galleries on the ground floor. These treasures include furniture, tapestries, small bronzes, plaques and medals, rock crystals, Renaissance jewels, majolica, Chinese porcelains, stained glass and textiles.

The Collection is remarkable because of the variety, quality and beauty of the objects it contains, but it is even more remarkable for the knowledge, taste and painstaking care which have controlled the selection of each object included in Mr. Widener's gift. In some cases, as in the Chinese porcelains or the furniture, he has searched for years for the objects needed to complete a group or set.

All of these objects of art are shown in galleries in the west wing on the ground floor, designed for the exhibition of smaller pieces of sculpture, tapestries and other objects not shown in the painting and sculpture galleries on the Main Floor. The ground floor galleries were completed to the smallest

detail before the building was opened in March 1941. The vitrines built into the walls, the niches, the lighting, were all finished according to blue prints which showed the placing of each object, down to the smallest bronze or porcelain. As a result, when the Collection arrived at the Gallery a short time ago, everything went into the place prepared in advance, so that it was possible, even in war-time, to install and exhibit immediately this large and varied collection and thus to carry out Mr. Widener's wish that the public should at once enter into the enjoyment of his gift.

The ground floor rooms devoted to the Widener Collection may be entered through the Long Gallery in which prints are usually exhibited; or it may be approached by the West staircase leading from the Main Floor. The walls of these ground floor rooms are uniformly treated with travertine stone and floors are black and gray Nero Nube marble. The artificial illumination is by fluorescent lighting concealed in the coves of the rooms. Individual objects, such as tapestries and sculpture, are spotlighted from small openings in the ceiling.

In the foyer at the foot of the West Staircase are shown Italian Renaissance furniture and also a col-

lection of bronze medals and plaques of the same period.

Opening from the foyer is a large room with a dark beamed wood ceiling which forms an appropriate setting for furniture and other works of the Italian Renaissance. At one end of the room is a carved stone fireplace, dating from the Fifteenth Century, with andirons attributed to the Venetian School of the Sixteenth Century. Along the walls are carved walnut chests made for the Strozzi, Altoviti, and other families; benches or cassabancas bearing the Medici arms, and chairs with cushions of old velvets, red or blue in color. On the benches are richly colored tapestry cushions which contrast pleasantly with the warm-toned furniture. A few reliefs in bronze, marble, and terracotta decorate the walls. In the center of one wall hangs the celebrated Flemish Gothic tapestry, made in Brussels about 1500, after a cartoon by a follower of Hans Memling. It is known as the "Mazarin Tapestry" because it was once the property of Cardinal Mazarin. On the tables are small bronzes, some by Giovanni Bologna, Riccio, Andriaen de Vries, and others. In order not to crowd the works of art, a sense of spaciousness has been maintained throughout the room.

A more intimate surrounding is provided in a small adjoining room for the smaller bronze statuettes,

rock crystals and jewels. The bronzes are grouped in glass cases or vitrines, set into the walls, lined with mirrors and lighted from above. Each object can be seen on all sides and readily compared with one another. In two recessed cases in this room are shown outstanding objects of Mediaeval Art. There is, for example, a so-called Aquamanile, representing a rider on a horse. In its abstract form, this Thirteenth Century vessel is close to the spirit of modern simplified design.

An important Limoges Reliquary or chasse of the Twelfth Century is of the champlevé variety. The colored enamel design is set into grooves made by gouging out the metal. In its severe simplicity this reliquary is a masterpiece of the Romanesque style.

A famous chalice of the Bishop Sugerius from St. Denis in France, also of the Twelfth Century, made of a single piece of sardonyx with gold handles and set with jewels is displayed in the same gallery.

A choice collection of rock crystals and jewels is shown in wall cases set flush with the travertine walls. When the doors are closed, the cases are indistinguishable from the wall. As the double doors are opened, light flashes on, illuminating a dazzling display of crystals and jewels against a background of white velvet.

The costly materials, the fine workmanship, and the elegant design of these specimens of the art of the Renaissance goldsmiths enchant the layman and delight the connoisseur who is able to examine these pieces at close range. One pendant of wrought gold and enamel represents Europa on a bull formed chiefly of a so-called baroque pearl; his hind legs are enamelled white, and hair, horns, and eyes are of gold. An enamelled and painted gold necklace with a pendant representing a sphinx is attributed to Benvenuto Cellini.

In another room, a few pictorial enamels from Limoges, such as the plate with the "Birth of Adonis", and a collection of Italian majolica are shown in four large wall cases lined with red velvet. Here are rare early pieces from the Medici Manufactory at Caffiagiolo, a whole case of the celebrated large plates from Deruta, as well as a fine selection of the fully developed Urbino variety. Each kind has its own merits, but the Deruta plates are, perhaps, the most striking on account of their metallic luster. Under modern fluorescent lighting the bluish, greenish, and reddish reflections are especially effective.

One large and two small rooms are given over to Chinese porcelains. Here again the walls are of travertine stone, in which are set recessed cases or vitrines, lined with mirrors and lighted from above, so that the

porcelains can be seen on all sides. The colors of the porcelains stand out most effectively against the simplicity of the stone walls.

In the long gallery are the decorated polychrome porcelains, particularly the Hawthorn vases, so-called because the wild prunus blossom which resembles the English hawthorn is used in the decoration. They, like the other porcelains in this room, were produced at the Imperial factory during the Ta Ch'ing dynasty between 1662 and 1795. These vases are among the most remarkable productions handed down to us from this era. Unrivalled in perfection, they constitute the acknowledged standard of excellence of all subsequent periods.

In the two adjoining galleries are Chinese Monochrome porcelains known as Clair-de-Lune, Celadon, Peach-Bloom and Sang-de-Boeuf, produced mostly during the reign of the Emperor K'ang Hsi, (1662-1722), also apple green and white monochromes produced from the Sixteenth through the Eighteenth Centuries.

In two adjoining galleries are shown French furniture of the Eighteenth Century. Among the signed pieces are two commodes by Joseph with gilded bronze mounts by Caffieri. There is also a suite of furniture of the period of Louis XV (about 1770), upholstered with tapestry from the Royal Manufactory of Beauvais.