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IL CAPORALE AT ORVIETO.

By W. BURGESS.

The year 1263 is remarkable in an ecclesiastical point of view as being that in which a very celebrated miracle is said to have taken place in the Church of St. Christina at Bolsena, not far from Orvieto. An incredulous priest, when consecrating the host, was converted by seeing drops of blood issue from the wafer on to the corporal upon which it was placed.

This occurrence led to three results: firstly, the festival of Corpus Christi was instituted, and has since remained one of the great festivals of the Roman Church; secondly, the Cathedral of Orvieto was rebuilt upon a larger scale; and thirdly, some years afterwards, viz. in 1338, the corporal was deposited in a magnificent silver reliquary, adorned with the most beautiful enamels. It is this reliquary which concerns us upon the present occasion. It may be described as a frontispiece consisting of three divisions, that in the centre being much larger than the side ones. They are separated by four buttresses and pinnacles, and are terminated at top with arches and pediments. The whole composition is often said to be a copy of the façade of the church, but there is really no similarity beyond the general features. These divisions are again subdivided into a series of compartments, filled with enamels, representing the history of the miracle and scenes from the life of our Lord. The back is exactly like the front, only the subjects are there entirely taken from the Passion. As far as my memory serves, the thickness is not very great, say some three inches. In reality no very great depth was required, as the only object inside is the corporal. This is shown by means of the centre compartment, which opens in two folding doors, and displays, under glass, a corporal of coarse linen with sundry dark stains upon it. It need scarcely

be said that it has not kept its original whiteness, but is now of a light brown colour.

In the summit of the central pediment is a moveable compartment, which has now lost all its enamels. It is here that the Host is placed when the reliquary is taken out of the church processionally, as it is on two occasions in the year. All over the reliquary, wherever there is a place, on the buttresses, on the pediments, and on the great hollow moulding of the base, there are enamels. How these enamels have been executed has long been a puzzle to writers on art, in consequence of a mistake by Agincourt, and its solution has been deferred from the difficulty of seeing the reliquary.

Agincourt gives a rough engraving in his *History of Art*,¹ and says that the subjects are "peintes sur fond d'email." At the same time he confesses to not having seen the object itself, but of having copied the plate and description from the work of Padre della Valle entitled "*Istoria del Duomo di Orvieto, Roma*," 1791. If we turn to the latter work we shall see that the enamels are not said to have been painted, but that the shrine is "tutto ornato di vaghe pitture a smalto."

Hence the dilemma. If Agincourt were right, and these elaborate (and they are very elaborate) enamels were painted, the art of using enamels as pigments with a brush, the discovery of which process is generally attributed to the end of the fifteenth century, must be very considerably antedated.

Unfortunately nobody could get access to the reliquary, which was only exhibited twice in the year, viz., on Easter Day and Corpus Christi. It was, and I believe is still, kept under four keys, in the hands of different persons, viz., the Bishop, the Gonfaloniere, the Canon Secretary (Camerlingo), and the President of the Fabric.

Du Sommerard tried to see it, but was met by the objection that so great an exception should not be made for the purpose of satisfying merely artistic curiosity.

M. Labarte was equally unfortunate, but he was assured by the Sacristan that the enamels were executed in the ordinary manner of Italian enamels, *i.e.*, translucent on relief.

¹ Agincourt's "*Histoire de l'Art*," t. vi, p. cxxiii.

In 1854 the late M. Didron made a journey into Italy, and among his principal objects was the resolving the question as to the enamels of the reliquary of Orvieto. In the fifteenth volume of the '*Annales Archéologiques*' is a very amusing account of what I am sorry to say was his failure. He got letters from Cardinal Antonelli, Mgr. Piccolomini, &c., and by this means procured three out of the four keys; but, alas! the Bishop was out of town, and the last key was not forthcoming; so he lost his labour, but consoled himself by drawing and describing the reliquary of St. Giovenale, which is kept in the "opera" or workshop attached to the Cathedral. This is published in the fifteenth volume of the '*Annales Archéologiques*'; and as it happens to be executed by the same goldsmith, and by the same processes as the *Corporale*, it was probably the very best thing he could have done.

In the month of April last I found myself at Orvieto, in company with Mr. R. P. Pullan, the well-known architect, and of course our first question was as to the possibility of seeing the *Corporale*. I need scarcely say that we expected a repetition of the old story, but to our intense surprise we were told that there was a chance, inasmuch as a German nobleman had just arrived in the city who was the bearer of the requisite order. Whether the production of the four keys is still demanded, I do not know; but, at all events, on the next day (Sunday) we had the pleasure of seeing the hitherto invisible reliquary, of which, by the way, photographs were to be procured in the town.

As I expected, the enamelled plates were not painted, but done in the ordinary manner, that is, the subject was engraved in very low relief and afterwards covered all over by a very thin coating of variously-colored enamels, the process being the same as described by Cellini in his *Trattato dell'Oreficeria*.

The remarkable points of these enamels at Orvieto are their comparatively early date (1335), their beautiful execution and their large size, the compartments with the histories being about $4\frac{3}{4}$ by $3\frac{3}{4}$, while those in the hollow of the base are narrower, but much longer. When we consider the artistic ability necessary to do such excellent bas-reliefs in the first instance, and the skill required to

cover them with enamel, to say nothing of the difficulty presented by the large surface, they must be placed among the most excellent examples of the process in question.

The Italians of the middle ages obtained very great proficiency in this branch of art, and we often find exquisite enamels in connection with very inferior goldsmiths' work, as in the frontal at Monza. Of the Corporale enamels, it may be sufficient to remark that they are executed in the very best style of the early part of the fourteenth century.

In the present instance the silversmiths' work presents nothing particular, and merely serves as a frame for the enamels; the crockets to the gables are very inferior (if original), being simply beaten out of a thin piece of silver and stuck on anyhow, and the two gurgoyles, at the side, representing the wolf of Sienna, are out of all proportion.

Round the base runs the following inscription :—" Hoc opus fecit fieri dominus frater Tramus Episcopus Urbevitanus et dominus Angelus Archipresbyter et dominus Ligus cappellanus domini papæ et Nicolaus de Alatro et dominus Fredus et dominus Ninus et dominus Leonardus Canonici Urbevitanus. Per magistrum Ugolinum et socios Aurifices de Senis factum fuit sub anno domini MCCCXXXVIII tempore Benedicti papæ XII."

Round the reliquary of S. Giovenale in the "opera" is the following : "Vgolinus et Viva de Senis fecerunt istum tabernaculum." Thus, both works are from the same hand, and executed very nearly at the same time. It will be observed that the artist belonged to Sienna, and it was, indeed, to that town that the inhabitants of Orvieto resorted for their art work. When the Cathedral had to be rebuilt, their architect, Lorenzo Maitani, came from Sienna. An excellent little book, by Ludovico Luzi, published at Florence, 1866, contains in its latter portion many curious documents relating to the Cathedral of Orvieto, and the artists who worked at it. Many other things, such as the marbles, were got from other places, but the glass mosaic was made on the spot by an expert, one Consiglio Stoppario di Monteleone. Unfortunately he got mixed up among some commotion, and, being banished from the city, was only allowed to return on

the petition of the architect and other worthy persons, but was obliged to have his salary reduced by one-third.

The second architect was a certain Meo, who, having been condemned and banished for homicide, had his sentence suspended for ten years in order that he should take the direction of the works in conjunction with some relatives of the late architect.

There are sundry notices of payments to Ugolino for his reliquary; and, as the time rolled on, we meet with payments to and negotiations with such men as Orcagna, Andrea Pisano, Fra Angelico, Pietro Perugino, and Luca Signorelli.

Having thus had the opportunity of clearing up a question which would never have arisen except for the mistake of Agincourt, I have thought it only right to put the affair upon record in the 'Archæological Journal.'

I may mention that C. E. Kempe, Esq., and his brother, Captain Kempe, were present on the occasion, and also saw the reliquary.