



## On a Collection of Flemish Domestic Benitiers By Alfred E. Knight

IN an age of collectors and collecting, when every corner of the earth is being industriously searched for antiquities and objets d'art of whatever kind, it is surprising that so little notice has been taken of benitiers. Yet of things artistic, having both the charm of age and old-world religious association, what objects could be found more deserving of the collector's attention? Occasionally one meets with a stray specimen in a private museum—stowed away, of course, on the dustiest shelf and in the darkest corner—but so rarely has this been our experience that we are almost inclined to think that the collection here in part figured and described is unique of its kind in England.

The owner, Major R. H. C. Tufnell, is a collector of many years' standing, not of benitiers merely, but of old arms and pewter, and, above all, of Indian coins. On one branch of Indian numismatics he is, indeed, a recognised authority; his works on the

coinage of South India, carried out under the auspices of the Madras and Mysore Government, being well known, and said to be fairly exhaustive. The benitiers contained in his collection were all found in Flanders, to which interesting country he has paid many visits, and it comprises examples of all periods in wood, bone, pewter, copper, brass, silver, stone, plaster, delft, and porcelain.

Flanders is, perhaps, the most priest-ridden country on the face of the earth; but if any collector of antiquities is in search of benitiers, he will find it a most happy hunting-ground, the few difficulties to be encountered giving zest to the search. Italy may be known to connoisseurs for its crucifixes, Spain for its reliquaries, France for its rosaries; but for benitiers—especially of the domestic type—Flanders will safely bear the palm.

Most of the specimens in Major Tufnell's collection were obtained from the houses of the poorer



No. I.—BRASS



No. II.—BRASS



No. III.—COPPER

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No. IV.—BONE

be it only of pewter or the homeliest delft: still more precious is the dirty and insanitary liquid in its shallow well—the Holy Water blessed by the priest. With this the happy father may perform the rite of baptism over his own children, and wage victorious warfare with the powers of evil that beset his dwelling. The folklore of the people abounds with instances of its wonderful efficacy; the following will serve for illustration.

A poor man who possessed not even a straw mattress on which to lay his children, found, one winter's night, a truss of straw. Wild with joy, he took it home; but scarcely had he laid it on the ground than the truss stood up on one end and began to dance. It was bewitched. Fortunately, the man's wife had that morning replenished their benitier with Holy Water, and she was quite equal to the occasion. Sprinkling some of the water on the truss and uttering a suitable adjuration, the truss disappeared, making a great noise as it vanished up the chimney.

Among the earliest benitiers in the collection are Nos. i. and ii., very simple forms in brass, with wells to hold the Holy Water shaped like the "dippers" used by water-colour painters of to-day. Especially interesting is the second of these, in which the early

classes in the Western provinces of the country, or from small village churches; while a few of the more intrinsically valuable came from the private chapels of the wealthier Flamands.

Precious to the simple-minded Flemish and is his benitier,

type of cross is formed by five pellets, a similar row, impressed from the back, appearing round the heart-shaped specimen figured as No. iii., which is of copper. These three specimens may all belong to the fifteenth century, though not improbably they are of a still earlier date: certainly they are not later.

A scarcer if not quite so early an example is No. iv., which is of bone. Bone benitiers are among the rarest of all, and the one here figured is in very fine condition. The disposition of the feet of the Christ, which are placed one over the other and pierced by a single nail, is noteworthy, and may be some indication of the period to which it belongs, but the cross itself is almost certainly of a later date. No. v., also of bone, shows the same placing of the feet, and is of the same character. It is inserted only for comparison, however, as it is a crucifix merely—the kind not infrequently hung above benitiers which do not themselves bear the image of the cross, e.g. Nos. vi. and vii., which are of metal.

The early carved wood benitiers are hardly less rare than those of bone, and, owing to the more perishable nature of the material, very early ones are almost unknown. The example No. viii., which is of oak, belongs to this category. The well is curiously similar in form and ornamentation to the bowls of the carved wood cups made to



No. V.—BONE



No. VI.—METAL

this day in Switzerland, but the piece is of undoubted antiquity. The rest of the carving has a most primitive appearance; the feet are crossed and the head is almost erect, as in the very early figures of Christ.

Nos. ix. to xiii., inclusive, are typical of a large and remarkable series. All are of pewter, and they mostly bear the hall-mark of the rose,



No. VII.—METAL

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or rose and crown ; of which latter type two specimens were figured in the second volume of this magazine. The evolution—or, rather, devolution—of the symbolic figures occurring at the foot of the Cross in each example is extremely curious, and in some ways instructive. Looking only at No. ix., one might speculate for a long time on the meaning of the apparently bent rods issuing from nothing definite and, though inclining towards each other, stopping short in a blob of pewter, which might be merely accidental. Various and somewhat fantastic theories have at times been woven round this quaint design, but No. x. or xi. at once solves the mystery. The rods are two arms—the left and right respectively of two cherubs—and the blob of pewter represents the sacred heart grasped in their hands, a representation quite common in the Flemish Church. It may be noted that the wing of one cherub can still be seen to the left in No. xi., and there are traces of them also on other specimens in the collection not figured here. No. ix., however, should be specially studied, as it offers the quaintest variation of this emblematic base in the whole collection, and, moreover, shows the flames issuing from the centre of the heart. Above it is the image of the Virgin with Child enthroned on clouds.

Other pewter examples are Nos. xii. and xiii. The cup-like well of the former has



No. XI.—PEWTER



No. X.—PEWTER

a cover of the same metal working on a zinc wire hinge. The embossed group above is presumably the Virgin and Child, but the Virgin's head is missing. The Child is triple-crowned, and bears in His left hand what appears to be the orb of the world. Both are clad in rich vestments, the embroidery of which

is represented in high and sharp relief. The latter is noteworthy as bearing below the bound and thorn-crowned Christ the legend "E.C. HOMO," and is without hall-mark.

In No. xiv. we have a silver-gilt triptych, procured in the neighbourhood



No. IX.—PEWTER

of Bruges. The central plaque shows the Virgin and Child enthroned, with Saints attendant, while the apex contains a minute representation of the Crucifixion. The two wings of the triptych contain figures of Saints, with Angels worshipping above. The work is very choice, and probably of the early seventeenth century. Curiously enough, the collection also contains a benitier without wings, which exactly corresponds with the centre plaque of this, and, from close examination, would seem to have been cast from the same mould, but an amethyst has been set in the front of the bowl where the Angel's head and wings are here represented. This was obtained at Antwerp, and, what is equally curious, both bear entirely different hall-marks. Specimens of this type are extremely rare.

Benitiers of delft and porcelain offer by far the greatest and quaintest variety, and of these there are some thirty or forty in Major Tufnell's collection ; a few of them are here figured. An early form is No. xv. The blue glaze in this specimen has run into the gray, the colouration recalling that on eighteenth-century Lambeth delft apothecaries' jars. The triangle in the centre, symbolizing the Trinity, bears a curious device, the meaning of which we



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No. XII.—PEWTER



No. XIV.—SILVER-GILT



No. XIII.—PEWTER

have been unable to ascertain, though it may not improbably be a corrupted abbreviation of the Hebrew name Jehovah, יהוה, so often found in this connection.

The quaint forms of the Virgin and Christ and the Angelic attendants on many of these are of extreme interest, but to illustrate even a small percentage of them would take up far more room than we have at our disposal. We may notice No. xvi., however, which represents a benitier of very early type. Here the figure of the Christ is, by means of lines diverging from the base, transformed into an anchor, the drops of blood from the pierced hands doubtless being intended to represent the anchor's chain—a touchingly quaint conception in which the old Flemish artist, in the true spirit of mediæval symbolism, combines the anchor of his hope with the Crucifixion of his Lord.

And now if one glances at No. xvii., and contrasts

its aggressive modernness with the art of the dead past, one may well feel ashamed. The cheap-looking white glaze, disfigured by the gilt and red lines introduced to emphasize the foliate pattern, the tawdry colouring of the oval plaque, in fact, the *tout ensemble*, "damn the base copy of the modern day"; yet this example marks a type, and degeneracy in Christian art of necessity goes hand in hand with decay of faith and religious earnestness.

The composite forms of many modern benitiers are not as a rule artistically pleasing. One specimen, not here figured, has a well of semi-translucent stone and a support of brass, a design which could hardly help lacking unity. The parts are joined by a rivet, and the clumsiness of the fastenings suggest late and degenerate work, though the figure of the Christ, which is distinct from the Cross, is doubtless of some antiquity. In another the well is of porcelain and the back of alabaster, but the oval plaque is merely



No. XV.—DELFT



No. XVI.—DELFT



No. XVII.—PORCELAIN

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plaster-of-Paris, and the studs are brass: while a third, with porcelain well, has an oval plaque of some

say, they serve the same purpose as those already alluded to, and are of equal interest. Many early



NO. XVIII.—PORCELAIN

dark composition on a wood foundation. Nos. xviii., xix., and xx. are other examples of porcelain benitiers.

Thus far we have spoken only of a few specimens in the collection which are purely for domestic use, the kind one sees hanging on the cottage walls of devout Flamands; but in addition to these there is another type exclusively of brass, copper, or pewter, which are suspended from any convenient point, of which Nos. vi. and vii. are examples. Needless to



NO. XIX.—PORCELAIN

and graceful forms of these occur, though they do not offer the same variety of form or decoration as those to which we have alluded.

The evolution of Christian art which may be traced in these objects, as in so many other objets d'art, is profoundly interesting, and deserves to be more widely studied. We have lately seen some silver crucifixes in Messrs. Spink & Son's Galleries, belonging to different periods, in which the changing ideas on one of the subjects here referred to may be traced step by step in a most instructive manner.



NO. XX.—PORCELAIN