

Elegant Arts Antiques

Points of Interest

A Newsletter for Collectors by Carolyn Meacham

January 2010



Enameled Thimbles

The word “enamel” can mean a variety of things, but for the most part, it represents a coating (usually shiny) over another surface. For the sake of this newsletter, the enamel we’re referring to is the form called vitreous enamel. This is the result of the fusion of powdered glass to a metal base through the process of heating or firing. At a high temperature (usually between 750 and 850 degrees Celsius) the powder melts and flows and then hardens as a smooth coating over the metal. Once cooled, the enamel needs to be polished to achieve a glassy finish. It can also be applied as a paste and can be transparent or opaque when fired.

Vitreous enamel has many wonderful properties: it’s smooth, hard, chemically inert and can take on bright, jewel like colors that last through the ages. The primary drawback is its tendency to shatter or crack when struck or when the metal base is bent. This is probably the reason we have no examples of enamel thimbles prior to the 18th century, even though we have written records of some made as early as the 1500s.

There are a variety of styles of enameling found on thimbles and the names for them are mostly French. French goldsmiths were the leaders in the jewelry industry from the middle ages so France was where the language of jewelry making evolved. Enameling was frequently used there for jewelry and precious objects of vertu. Oddly enough, the French seem to lag behind most of the world in examples of enamelled thimbles. Below are several enameling styles to be found on thimbles with the English translations of the French in brackets.

Basse-taille (low-cut) - The surface of the metal was engraved or stamped with a low relief design which could be seen through a translucent enamel. (Fig. 1) The technique was developed in Italy in the late 11th century.

Champlevé (raised field) - The design is stamped or hand tooled with raised metal areas that create part of the design and the enameling is applied in the lower areas. (Fig. 2) The raised metal areas frame the enamel and are sometimes gilded for a richer effect. Black enamel is often seen used in this style and they are thought to be mourning thimbles. Fig 2a shows a very detailed chased and enameled example.



Figure 1. Sterling thimble with basse-taille style enameled band, American c.1920.



Figure 2. 18 carat gold thimble with champlevé style enameled band, French hall-marked c.1830.

Cloisonné (cell / partitioned off) - Designs or “cells” are formed when thin metal strips are attached on edge to the surface of a background metal. The areas created are completely filled with opaque enamel of various colors. After firing, the enamel is ground smooth and polished. It was used in the Byzantine period for religious pieces (6th century). The Japanese and Chinese are both well known for using this technique. (Fig. 3)

Emaux Peints (painted enamel) - Also called Limoges enamelling after the town where the technique was practiced with much success. Pictures are “painted” with different colored enamels, often on top of a solid colored enamel ground. (Fig. 4) This takes a lot of skill and knowledge as you cannot mix different colored enamels to create a new color like you can with paint. You’ll just end up with tiny specks of both colors. Usually, every color applied to the design has to have a separate firing.

Filigree - Decorative wires, usually twisted, are used to create surface designs on the thimble. Enamel is applied to the small areas enclosed by the wires. (Fig. 5) The enamel is shallow and is easily damaged, but the wires themselves are decorative and the design can still look good without the enamel.

Ronde bosse (round bump) - This term is used to describe beadlike enamel dots that are added directly to the surface or on top of other enameling. The purpose is to imitate jeweled trim and the raised dots look like small cabochon-shaped gems. It’s more common to see this used on enameled metal buttons than on thimbles. The most often seen thimble related use of this technique is on the Worcester porcelain “jeweled” thimbles. (Fig. 6) Enamels can also be added to porcelain. The term “encrusted” is used for any enameling used to create a raised surface.



Figure 2a. Gold mourning thimble w/ black champlévé enamel, English c.1870



Figure 3. Cloisonné enamel on silver, Chinese 20th cent.



Figure 4. Emaux Peints (hand painted) enamel on brass thimble, French 19th century



Figure 5. Silver with filigree enamel Greek c. 1900.



Figure 6. Worcester porcelain thimble with ronde bosse enameled “jewels”, English c.1900.

Guilloché (engine-turning) - Engine turning is the mechanical cutting of lines on metal to create a design. Because the pattern is engraved, the reflection of light through the translucent enamel overlay is enhanced, especially when the piece is turned under the light. (Fig. 7) Fabergé is the best known of the jewelers who favored this technique. A less precise and cheaper method of achieving this effect is to enamel over foil, sometimes embossed with a pattern.



Figure 7. Guilloché enameled thimbles, Norway c.1900.

Often the different techniques are combined. For example a Guilloché enameled ground often has a hand painted enamel design overlaying it. Figure 8 shows a very famous use of this technique in a variety of Norwegian silhouette designs.



Figure 8. Painted silhouette designs over a guilloché enameled ground, Norwegian c.1900.

In addition to handpainting, a design can be applied to an enameled ground by stenciling, silk screening and transfer pattern. (Fig.9)



Figure 9. Stenciled enamel thimbles, Austrian 20th century.

Plique à jour (open to the day {or light}) - This is a variation of the cloisonné technique. The cells are created with metal strips or wires, but the metal backing is temporary. After the enamel is applied and fired, the backing is removed or polished away and light can shine through the translucent enamel. It resembles stained glass and is very fragile, thus making it a somewhat impractical choice for thimbles. (Fig. 10)



Figure 10. 2 thimbles created with plique à jour enamel, Modern, probably Chinese.

Grisaille (greyness) - This technique creates raised areas of design. In its purest form a dark colored background is used and white or light colored enamels are painted in layers to build up the design. When used on colored or transparent enamels, this technique is called “Camaieu” enameling and is often seen on Bilston or South Staffordshire enamels. (Fig. 11)

Figure 11. Bilston enameled thimble, English c.1770. The flowers are quite raised from the ground.



There are so many styles of enameled thimbles that it would be impossible to show more than a representative sample in a newsletter. It would be a great area to assemble a specialist collection of thimbles.

Figures 12-23 show enameled thimbles in some of the various styles and nationalities. I wish to thank Beryl Frank, Diane Pelham Burn, Marlon van Peijpe and Kit Froebel for providing pictures from their files and collections.



Figure 12. Silver thimbles with wide transfer pattern enameled bands. Made by Paardekoper. Dutch c.1960.



Figure 13. Steel thimble with enameled band and plaque. Made by the Stettmacher company in Austria for export to France, c.1937.



Figure 14. 800 silver thimble with thick handpainted enamel band. Made by Soergel & Stollmeyer for the tourist trade. German, c.1950.



Figure 15. Sterling thimble with painted roses on a guilloché enameled background, by David Andersen, Norway c.1900.



Figure 16. Persian gold thimble with enameled portraits and flowers, c.1860.



Figure 17. Ketcham & McDougall sterling thimble with enameled pansy band, American c.1890.



Figure 18. Simons Bros. sterling thimble with painted enameled band, American c.1920.



Figure 19. Webster Company sterling thimble with painted enamel band, American c.1910.



Figure 20. Filigree enameled on silver thimbles, Norway c.1900.



Figure 21. Enamel on sterling by Peter Swingler, Engl. c.1980.



Figure 22. Filigree enameled silver thimble, Russian c.1900.



Figure 23. Two sterling thimbles with English hallmarks, left dated 1923 by James Fenton & right dated 1963 by James Swann & Son.



In the 20th century, the Germans produced a huge variety of enameled band thimbles. While most are not the quality of the 20th century Norwegian enameled thimbles, they are colorful and very collectable. They often have stone or colored glass tops and a few are illustrated below.

