
Koopman Rare Art

Director's Choice – Timo Koopman **Hermann Ratzersdorfer's Masterpiece**

We return after a small break with this week's Directors Choice. The sumptuous silver-gilt, enamel and crystal cup and cover of Neptune holding aloft his hippocamp. The history of Viennese enamels is renowned, but this example incorporates every aspect of the craft from the beautifully modelled and cast Neptune to the intricately carved rock crystal and sumptuous array of bright enamels, pearls and precious stones. This is a glorious moment in the 19th century, where the skills of the Renaissance were revisited and Hermann Ratzersdorfer brought glory to the city of Vienna.



This masterpiece has a rock-crystal body carved with scrollwork and formed as a cup and cover. Its silver-gilt bands richly enamelled with flowers, colourful birds and scrollwork and applied with amethysts and natural pearls around the neck. The beautiful curling tail and the torso of the hippocamp, as well as below its spread carved wings all with such bands. The cup is supported by the gilt half-kneeling figure of Poseidon holding a trident, wearing opaque pale blue enamel cuffs and a wreath, the spreading foot also carved with scrollwork and mounted with similarly decorated bands of high relief enamel on a gilt ground.

Since their inception, Viennese enamel and hardstone Historismus objects have been victims of their own success. Popularity with customers rapidly led to an increase in production and a decline in quality comparable to that seen in the Historismus silver industry in Hanau. The most choice elements are to be found in the best early pieces by goldsmiths such as Hermann Ratzersdorfer and Hermann Böhm, dating from around 1870, such as with our wonderful hippocamp. These objects are similar in form to those

found in the later, mass-produced items. However, very few have taken the trouble to notice the obvious differences in quality and execution. Certainly, since the revival of interest in 19th century works of art during the early 1970s, the criterion for judging Viennese objects has changed. Perhaps it is now time to look at each object on its own merits and admire the best pieces, such as this rock-crystal centrepiece with elaborate enamel mounts, for their vigorous design, excellence of craftsmanship and brilliantly colourful enamelling, an effect described in 1889 as “gorgeous without being barbaric”.



*A 19th century dish Vienna, circa 1880 by Hermann Ratzersdorfer – formerly in the
Koopman Rare Art Collection*

Vienna, the seat of the Hapsburg Empire, was ideally suited to join the historic revival which was sweeping the rest of Europe. Not only did the Kaiserliche Schatzkammer host the most inspiring mediaeval and renaissance objects, but Austria and nearby Hungary had an unequalled history of enamelled jewellery production. Vienna was also already in the forefront of the movement to improve modern design with the opening of dedicated museums and Applied Art Schools which provided informed assistance (Josef Ritter von Storck, Professor of Architecture is thought to have designed objects for

Ratzersdorfer) and were ultimately to sow the seeds for the Secession revolt. Furthermore, it was decided that Vienna too should have its own International Exhibition in 1873 with half its space devoted to promoting the Austrian Empire, and half for the rest of the world. The Exhibition was ill-starred: the United States did not show, the premises were not finished for the opening ceremony, the Vienna Stock Exchange collapsed, cholera broke out and visitors, such as Sir Richard Burton, complained bitterly of the high prices. Exceptionally, critics and public praised the neo-Renaissance creations of the Viennese goldsmiths which were said to light up the gloomy Exhibition Rotunda with their colour and sparkle.

Chief of these goldsmiths was the Imperial warrant-holder, Hermann Ratzersdorfer (1815-1891), who started in business in 1843, producing "Rococo Galanterie Waaren", the type of object he was to show at the 1851 Exhibition in London, winning a medal for "a toilet glass ... of elaborate and choice workmanship". Already by the Paris 1855 Exposition, where he showed "un joli coffret d'argent émaillé", the firm was moving towards the neo-Renaissance taste. From 1867, Dual Monarchy with Hungary provided access to an affordable source of rock crystal and other hardstones.

Hermann Ratzersdorfer was born in Vienna and established himself as a well-respected silversmith and goldsmith specialising in objects of vertu. His works in silver were usually adorned with embellishment of grisaille or enamelling. His mark was first registered in 1842. In 1851 he exhibited at the London Exhibition. At the Paris Exhibition of 1855 he won a second-class medal. Ratzersdorfer regularly exhibited in Vienna, London and Paris. He was presented with a diploma of honour at the 1873 Exhibition in Vienna which "critics and public praised the neo-Renaissance creations of the Viennese goldsmiths which were said to light up the gloomy Exhibition Rotunda with their colour and sparkle," according to Roy Strong's bibliography of the silversmith in the collector's encyclopedia, *Victoriana to Art Deco*. Further prizes were to follow as Ratzersdorfer changed direction from reproductions of the Rococo to those of the Renaissance for which he is known today. For the ill-fated Vienna World Exhibition of 1873, he created a dazzling display of enamel and mounted crystal objects. By 1881, Hermann had handed over the reins to his son Julius who seems to have continued in business for only a few years after his father's death in

1891.



Herman Ratzersdorfer – Formerly Koopman Rare Art Collection

From the Renaissance period through to the eighteenth-century rock crystal was considered to be one of the most highly valued of the minerals and held by all as a marvel of nature. No cabinet of curiosity or Schatzkammer would be complete without a wonderful, mounted rock crystal object to admire. Its transparency and irregular shape made it much sought after. It became an essential part of the Renaissance spirit, and the building of spectacular collections demonstrated Princely virtue and their right to power. The European courts were certainly at the centre of this, and sovereigns displayed their great wealth and culture not only to assert their power but also their individuality. From the 15th century onwards many of these treasures came from Italy and the Medici family in Florence together with the Hapsburg family whose home was in Vienna were amongst the greatest patrons of these goldsmiths and enamellers.



The Medici Treasury in Florence (Museo degli Argenti)

From the Sarachi workshops for the marriage of Ferdinando I in 1589

With this great tradition already in place in Vienna, it is little wonder that Ratzersdorfer was so inspired by these earlier pieces. At the Great Exhibition of 1851, Ratzersdorfer was one of only four exhibitors from the Habsburg Empire to show goldsmiths' work, to the chagrin of the organisers who nevertheless awarded him the Jury's medal. Further prizes were to follow as Ratzersdorfer changed direction from reproductions of the Rococo to those of the Renaissance for which he is known today. For the ill-fated Vienna World Exhibition of 1873, he created a dazzling display of enamel and mounted crystal objects. By 1881, Hermann had handed over the reins to his son Julius who seems to have continued in business for only a few years after his father's death in 1891.

A preoccupation with the overall unity of the design is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Ratzersdorfer's work, a concern that was not maintained by succeeding generation of Viennese makers working in the same genre. The creations of Hermann Böhm, another of the renowned Austrian goldsmiths and others, often decorated with an array of disparate ornamental elements, demonstrated the consequences of this.

The enamelling process involved fusing tiny glass particles with heat to form a solid layer of colour onto a

variety of different metals, such as copper, sterling silver or gold. The metal surface would be roughened for better adhesion and the finely powdered enamel could be mixed with an oil and painted on or sieved over the surface. The work would then be fired. The process in the earlier periods of the 17th century was complicated as the initial coat had to be bright and white and have a melting temperature high enough to withstand all subsequent firings. The enamels produced could be opaque or translucent and a multitude of colours were available, produced by dissolving metal oxides in the melted glass.

Viennese silversmiths adopted new techniques in using prefabricated elements for the assembly of such eye-catching subject and extended this to various aspects of their enamel decoration. Central to this was the development of a range of colours with a similar melting point that could be applied simultaneously, rather than successively, as had previously been the practice.



From The Art of Carl Fabergé, by A. Kenneth Snowman.

Illustrating the range of guilloché enamels colours that were available

This led to a reduction in the number of firings required, thereby both cutting costs and reducing the risk of spoiling the piece. At the same time an approximation of the sumptuous appearance of painted champlevé enamel was achieved by gilding the white enamel ground left undecorated by the painters.

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For all enquiries please do not hesitate to call or email on:

020 7242 7624 / info@koopman.art



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12 Dover Street
W1S 4LL, London
United Kingdom

Phone: +44 20 7242 7624

Email: info@koopman.art

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