

## ENGRAVING OF A GOLD NIELLO,

*Found at Matlask, Norfolk,*

IN THE POSSESSION OF ROBERT FITCH, ESQ.

COMMUNICATED BY HIM.

For the kindness and the liberality shown to the Society on the present occasion, the Committee feel themselves called upon to offer to Mr. Fitch their especial thanks. Not only has he, in the most obliging manner, consented to allow his precious relic to appear in their volume, but he has caused an engraving to be made of it by a distinguished artist, Mr. De La Motte, and has supplied the requisite number of impressions at his own expense. His engraving is a most faithful copy of the original, which is of the same size, and represents the crucified Saviour; not with the Virgin, the Mater Dolorosa, standing, as usual, on one side of the cross, and the Evangelist, the beloved disciple, on the other; but, in their places, a Bishop, mitred and holding his pastoral crook, but with no attribute of any kind to designate him; and the Baptist, pointing with his right hand to the Lamb, the Agnus Dei, who is recumbent on a book, held in his left. The figures are surrounded by flowers and foliage of the most delicate and graceful workmanship; and the same terms may be applied to the execution throughout, which will bear a comparison with those of a like magnitude figured by Ottley or Cicognara. An opinion might hence naturally arise, that this Niello was, like those, a production of a high period and school of art; but the objection at once occurs, that, in such a case, it could not have been admitted, that



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those, who, we learn from the Holy Scripture itself, occupied this position at that awful moment, should have been supplanted by the Baptist and a Prelate.\* This remarkable, though far from unique, deviation from Gospel truth, joined to such able workmanship, cannot but suggest the idea of a barbaric conception, wrought by Italian hands; and, however the question may at first sound startling, it nevertheless deserves to be put, whether this interesting relic may not be of Græco-Byzantine art, or, in plainer English, may not have been made in Russia. Count Leopoldo Cicognara, the author of the admirable *Storia della Scultura*, commenced, not many years before his death, a similar History of Engraving, † but, unfortunately, only lived to publish the first three sections: those upon Niellos, their origin, their composition, and their decomposition; upon Playing-cards; and upon Lithography. He in this work makes particular mention of a Treatise, entitled, *Diversarum Artium Schedula*, ‡ by a monk of the

\* Since the above was written, it has been stated to the author by the Very Rev. F. C. Husenbeth, that it is not uncommon to find Saints thus standing at the foot of the Cross. "I have seen," he says, "St. Dominic substituted for the Beloved Disciple, and St. Catharine of Sienna for our Blessed Lady. In other cases, St. Francis of Assisi or St. Anthony of Padua. The Bishop I should think meant for St. Nicholas; as, when a Bishop stands without any emblem, it is generally he who is meant. My idea is, that St. Nicholas, the patron of mariners as well as of children, was placed there as most appropriate for the wearers of the reliquary." The same kind friend objected to its being of Russian origin, from the robes of the Prelate being those of the Eastern, not the Western Church. But, though the remark deserves the greatest weight, it is, surely, not overwhelming; for it is far from being the case with articles of any kind, and least of all with those appropriated to religion, which is "omnium temporum, omnium regionum," that they should be manufactured exclusively for the country where they are produced. Italian workmen, too, might naturally love to represent Italian priests.

† *Memorie Spettanti alla Storia della Calcografia*, 8vo., Prato. 1831: with a folio volume of plates.

‡ Bartsch, in his "Essai sur l'Histoire de la Découverte de l'Impression des Estampes," (*Peintre Graveur*, Vol. XIII.) mentions, p. 2, this work of

eleventh century of the name of Theophilus, whom he styles "un autore altrettanto prezioso quanto chiaro nel suo modo di esporre;" and in an Appendix he gives a translation of the three chapters appropriated by him to Niellos. From another part of the treatise he quotes the following extract: the author, in speaking of the celebrity acquired by different places from their skill in producing works of art, proceeds to say, "Quam si diligentius perscruteris, illic invenies quidquid diversorum colorum generibus et mixturis habet Grecia, quidquid in electorum operositate seu Nigelli § varietate novit Ruscia, quidquid ductili vel fusili seu interrasili opere distinguit Arabia, quidquid in vasorum diversitate seu gem-

Theophilus, which was first published by C. Leiste, at Brunswick, in 1787, from a MS. in the Wolfenbützel Library. A notice of it, with some interesting particulars touching the author, had previously appeared in the *Bibliotheca Naniana*, of Morelli. Other copies exist in manuscript in the Public Libraries of Vienna, Paris, Leipzig, and Cambridge.

§ It needs scarcely be said that the Latin word *Nigellus* is obviously the same as the Italian *Niello*; the only difference lying in that the latter language softens the pronunciation of whatever is adopted into it, and changes the final consonant into a vowel. Here, too, is clearly seen the real sense of the term; except that, instead of meaning *blackish*, as might be imagined, it is rather to be translated intensely black. It may be added, that this mention of Niellos by Theophilus, at once contradicts the generally received, but very erroneous, impression, that the making of them originated with Finiguerra. Such a manufacture was evidently the modification of the art of inlaying one metal with another; and, not to mention the "murenulæ aureæ vermiculatæ argento" of the Song of Solomon, or Homer's Shield of Achilles, or the Jupiter of Phidias, numerous and decisive proofs are given of the existence of such workmanship by various classical authors. But it was with Finiguerra, as will be found stated at length in the conclusion of this Paper, that the application of them to the taking of impressions of engravings on paper had its rise; and hence their celebrity as the leading-star to calcography: hence, too, their high marketable price, never more clearly shown than in the sale of Sir Mark M. Sykes' Prints, in 1824, when a Pax in Niello (Part III., No. 1244) was bought for £315 by Mr. Woodburn, who, the following day, told the writer of this note that he considered that the possession of it added a thousand pounds to the value of his collection of engravings.

marum ossuumve sculpturâ auro decolorat Italia, quidquid in fenestrarum pretiosâ varietate diligit Francia, quidquid in auri, argenti, cupri, et ferri, lignorum, lapidumque subtilitate solers laudat Germania, &c.” It thus appears that Russia had distinguished herself in the manufacture of Niellos at a very early period, a period considerably anterior to the revival of art in Italy; and the learned Ciampi has shown, in the *Anthologia Florentina*, that the character then acquired by her was never lost, but was continually maintained by the introduction of fresh engravers from other countries.

It is begged, however, that whatever has been said upon this subject may be received simply as matter for inquiry, and nothing further. The writer cannot too distinctly disavow any intention to offer an opinion of his own. To do otherwise were truly an unpardonable piece of presumption, when judges so conversant with the subject as Cicognara and Ottley have not ventured to pronounce decisively upon the date, or even the country, of a considerable number of the specimens figured in their respective works. The former of these, in the publication above cited, introduces plates of 124, all in his own cabinet, then the richest in Europe. He describes a few others; and he notes the existence of 292 more, in addition to the 165 enumerated by Duchesne.\* Our own countryman, of whom it may safely be said, that few men were better qualified, as well by acuteness of intellect, as by diligence of inquiry, and depth and variety of knowledge, to treat of art in all its ramifications, has entered much at length into the subject of Niellos in his two most important publications, the *History of Engraving* and a *Collection of Facsimiles of scarce and curious Prints by the early Masters of the Italian, German, and Flemish Schools*. In the first of these he has confined himself to giving two plates after Niellos by Finiguerra, both of large size, and one of them of extensive notoriety. The

\* *Essai sur les Nielles, gravures des Orfèvres Florentins du XV<sup>m</sup>e. Siècle.* 8vo. Paris, 1826.

second contains fifty-six; one only of the magnitude of those just mentioned, many of the rest extremely small. But here it is necessary to stop: to advance further would be to enter upon the History of Engraving, a most inviting, but at the same time most dangerous ground; for who that sets his foot in it can tell where he shall stop? and any disquisition of the kind would be altogether unsuitable to an occasion like the present. Thus much, however, it may be allowed to add, that every author upon the subject, from the time of Vasari, happily designated by Ottley the "Herodotus of Art," has considered that it is to Niellos we are indebted for the existence of those prints, the ornaments of our portfolios, our libraries, and our drawing-rooms, the inexhaustible source of unceasing instruction and pleasure. Nor can it be otherwise than acceptable to a large number of the members of the Society that this short memoir should be closed with the following account of the mode of making Niellos, and of the invention of Callography by their means; both as translated by Ottley from Vasari.

On the first part of the subject, he says, "The way of making works of this kind is, first to design the intended subject with a steel point upon the silver, which must be of an even and smooth surface, and then to engrave it with the *burin*, an instrument which is made of a square rod of iron, cut at the end from one angle to the other angle opposite, obliquely; so that, being sharp, and cutting, as it were, on both sides, its point runs along with great ease, and the artist is enabled to engrave with it most delicately. . . . When, therefore, he has engraved and finished his work with the burin, he takes silver and lead," (with the addition of copper, sulphur, and borax, as is properly observed by another writer,) "and, mixing them together on the fire, makes a composition called *niello*, which is of a black colour, very brittle, and, when melted, of a nature to run with great nicety into the work. This composition is then bruised very

fine, and laid upon the engraved silver plate, which it is necessary should be quite clean. The plate is then placed near a fire of green wood, when, by means of a pair of bellows, the flame is blown upon the *niello*, which, being dissolved by the heat, runs about till it has filled all the engraved work made by the burin. Afterwards, when the silver is cold, the superfluous part of the composition is scraped off, or worn away by degrees with a pumice-stone; and, lastly, the work is rubbed with the hand, or with a piece of leather, until the true surface appears, and every thing is polished." He subsequently adds, "The art of copper-plate engraving derived its origin from Maso Finiguerra, a Florentine goldsmith, about the year of our Lord 1460. For it was the custom of that artist, whenever he had engraved any work in silver, which was to be filled with *niello*, to take an impression or mould of it, previously, with very fine earth: over this mould he poured melted sulphur, from which, when cold, the earth was removed: the sulphur cast, then exhibiting an impression corresponding with the engraved plate, was lastly rubbed with soot moistened with oil, until all its cavities were filled with black, when the whole produced an effect similar to that which the *niello* afterwards gave to the engraving on the silver. He also took impressions upon damped paper, with the same dark tint, pressing a round roller, smooth in every part, over the paper, by which means his works became printed; the impressions so taken assuming the appearance of drawings done with a pen."

To return to Mr. Fitch's Niello,—its being of gold cannot fail to be accounted remarkable, inasmuch as the material of every one of those mentioned by Cicognara and Ottley is, without exception, silver; although many of them are represented as ornamented here and there, and some as covered all over, with gilding. One only other gold Niello appears to be known to exist. This latter was found at Devizes, and is in the possession of the Rev. Wm. Maskell. It is not very

dissimilar in form from that before the Society, but is somewhat larger. What is very extraordinary, it also bears the figures of the Baptist and the Bishop, with flowers by their sides. Is it not therefore possible that both may have been engraved in honour of some particular prelate, or to commemorate some remarkable occurrence? There is, at the same time, this strong difference between them, that in the Wiltshire Niello the Crucifixion is wanting, and the figures stand singly on the two sides of the little casket—for a casket it is clear that each of these was, though, in the case of the Norfolk specimen, one only of its faces remains. The loss of the other may possibly be accounted for by the circumstances under which it was found. A labourer driving his waggon into a clayey field in wet weather, observed something that glittered protruding into the deep rut, and drew out this, the precious object of his discovery. The locality affords no clue to its probable former possessor; for Matlask is a village where no religious house ever existed, and where no man of rank or opulence is known to have resided. The only allowable conjecture seems to be, that it may have belonged to one of the Paston family; nor does *that* stand upon any better foundation than that they were the lords of the soil from 1467 to 1740. Its sacred subject obviously points out its religious destination. And such was the common use of Niellos, which were generally employed in the ornamenting of church plate. The custom seems to have been peculiarly prevalent of introducing them into Paxes; when, carried to the lip, they could not escape the observation, and could scarcely fail to arrest the attention of the eye. So seldom were they used for other purposes, except the ornamenting of knife-handles, and articles of that description, that Cicognara avowedly congratulates himself upon the possession of a very small number charged with portraits and armorial bearings. These he figures; but it is to be observed, that of his many plates, abounding with incidents from the life of our Saviour, none contains the Cru-