

ANTOON & TORKILD MALFAIT

SEVEN CENTURIES OF
HOLY-WATER PAILS & HOLY-WATER FONTS

IN BRONZE, BRASS AND PEWTER





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ANTIQUA NOVA



"Saint-Jerome in study",
Flemish school 16th
century.
© By courtesy of Haboldt
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frontispice:
Joos van Cleve (after
1480 – Antwerpen
1540/41), "The death of the
blessed Virgin"
© Alte Pinakothek,
München (D), inv.waf 150

Preface

Literature concerning the "artes minores", until recently in the shadow of the "Great arts", is completed with scientific publications turned to a larger public, the last years somewhere with an antiquarian character, which emphasize any aspect of applied arts.

The last decades works and studies were published about silver, copper, tin, glass, porcelain, furniture and textile. The value of these products is very unbalanced and commercially oriented, and mostly too restricted in space and time or incomplete for one or another reason.

This book treats about holy-water fonts in bronze, brass and pewter.

Water, and specific holy water, has in many cultures for tens of centuries a rich symbolic sense: purification, blessing, freshness and fertility.

This function of purification and benediction happened in the Roman Catholic world by means of fixed, and later of portable fonts which contain the holy water. The religious and aesthetic emanation of these holy-water fonts, since centuries in use in the Western world, is extremely fascinating and many-sided and is placed in a special daylight in this book.

Contrary to what can be expected, the existing literature and documentation concerning these purification-fonts are rather unusual and limited to few chapters, articles and contributions in monographs, magazines and catalogues. Exhibitions concerning the religious objects represented in this book, are practically unknown.

The authors of this work, completing this lacuna, made a selection of 256 representative holy-water fonts and -pails, from Western, Middle and Southern Europe, from a unique collection of some 470 pieces, which gives an European dimension to this book.

To this objective, most of the valuable museums and churches in Europe have been visited and, at the same time, all literature concerning this matter has been consulted. The selected pieces have been classified, where possible, in 22 classes or families and compared with fonts of the same nature which figure in the artistic world on paintings, etchings, pictures, retables and stained-glass windows.

Especially fascinating are the precise individual descriptions, the accompanying close-ups and the above-mentioned references to paintings and other branches of "Fine arts" on which similar fonts can be found. This work completes clearly a gap and, moreover, it is technically very well illustrated.

A perfect contribution to this book is the indispensable article of my colleague Prof. Dr. J. Lamberts, concerning the ritual meaning of holy water in the Roman Catholic religion.

I may hope that the reader of this abundantly illuminated publication, which will be used as a book for looking and studying, obtains a better image of the art trade of our bronze-workers, brass-founders and tinsmiths, who from the 14th century were active throughout Europe and who left us an extraordinary treasure of art objects.

Prof. F. Van Noten

Honorary director of the Royal Musea for Art and History, Brussels



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Large bronze holy-water pail intended for liturgical purposes
a combination of the types 3 (on feet), 5 (bell-shape) and 7 (head's-shaped handle attachments).

Polished body with twice a double ornamental ring at the top and below.

Original iron handle, semicircular and not interchangeable, the middle part being spiral-shaped.

The handle attachments shaped like bearded men's heads, one having perforated the middle of the face, the other the right eye.

The pail stands on three pentadactyl feet, 4 cm long, with a square center hole.

- Height 25,5 cm (without handle), 41 cm (with handle)
- Diameter 24 cm (at the top), 15,5 cm (below)
- Width of the body 21,5 cm
- Depth 21,5 cm
- Western Europe
- 15th century

See nos. 3,5 and 7 at the chapter "Collective specification of the several types".

Art-historical research and authors

Dealing with men's heads-shaped handle junctions, see at Theuerkauff-Liederwald A.-E., "Mittelalterliche Bronze- und Messinggefäße – Eimer – Kannen – Lavabokessel", p. 157, ill. 134: 1st third of 16th century.



Large holy-water pail of yellow bronze, intended for liturgical rite
a combination of the types 3 "on feet" and 8 "mortar".

Body with three horizontal ornamental bands and some sixteen runner gates. Original cast-iron handle not interchangeable.

The handle attachments are simultaneously cast with the body.

The pail is resting on three triangular 3 cm long feet and has a rather rough finishing.

- Height 17,5 cm (without handle), 28,5 (with handle)
- Diameter 20,2 cm (at the top), 18 cm (below)
- Depth 16 cm
- Width of the body 13,9 cm
- Weight 2,300 kg
- Western Europe
- 14th – 15th century

See nos. 3 and 8 at the chapter "Collective specification of the several types".

Kettle or holy-water pail of bronze
a combination of the types 3 (on feet), 6 (with cartouches) and 7 (with heads-shaped handle junctures).

Body in straight up perpendicular form with three ornamental rings in the middle; at the top and at the bottom two bands showing largely worn out cartouches with stylised representations.

Original iron handle, semicircular and not interchangeable.

The handle junctions, solder-fastened to the body, are shaped like human heads, the centre of which being perforated to seize the handle.

The pail is resting on three feet, each one with a decorative ring at the top, and is ending in a one-toed foot with a little bar as a center hole.

- Height 16 cm (without handle), 25,5 cm (with handle)
- Diameter 15,8 cm (at the top), 12 cm (below)
- Depth 12 cm
- Length of the feet 5 cm
- Weight 2,300 kg
- France
- 15th – 16th century

See nos. 3, 6 and 7 at the chapter "Collective specification of the several types".

Art-historical research and authors

1. The excavation at the upper edge may lead one to suppose that a cover was used at the time; so it remains to be seen whether this type has been used as a kettle or as a marmite.

A similar model has been described as a "small marmite" at Verster's ("Koper en brons van voorheen", ill. 47) and as a "kettle" at W. Dexel's ("Das Haugerät Mitteleuropas", p. 161, ill. 118). Therefore the specification as a type for mixed use is a very likely assumption;

2. Lockner "Messing 15.-17. Jahrhundert", 1982, p. 130, ill. 238 and 239 (combinations of types nos. 3, 6 and 7): Central Europe, about 1500 ("Dreifüßsimer");

3. Lockner "Messing 15.-17. Jahrhundert", 1982, p. 134 ("Der Dreibein-Kessel"); ill. 246 up to 248a: 16th century, one of them being dated 1500;

4. Theuerkauff-Liederwald A.-E., "Mittelalterliche Bronze- und Messinggefäße – Eimer – Kannen – Lavabokessel", (same combinations), p. 121, ill. 36 (2nd half 13th century), and ill. 37 (14th century); p. 122, ill. 36 (2nd half 13th century), and ill. 37 (14th century); p. 122, ill. 36 and 39: both of them about 1400 (Eimer auf drei Füßen).



Small pentagonal bronze holy-water pail with pointed nose and flattened back, for vertical position or wall-suspension, for domestic use

Handle trilobate, the middle piece at the top being linear, typical form for the handles of these pentagonal holy-water pails

The handle attachments, fluted with three vertical file-strokes, are simultaneously cast with the body

- Height without handle 9,5 cm, with handle 17 cm
- Diameter 6,8 x 5,4 cm at the top, foot 5,8 x 4,9 cm
- Hollow foot 2,1 cm
- Flanders
- 15th – early 16th century

See no 10 at the chapter "Collective specification of the several types".



Small yellow bronze holy-water pail, five-sided front view, flat nose (rather rare peculiarity) and flattened back for wall-suspension or vertical position, for domestic use

Hexagonal base with casting-hole in the bottom. Interchangeable and contemporary handle trilobate.

Handle attachments simultaneously cast with the body.

- Hollowed foot (depth 1,7 cm).
- Height 11 cm (without handle), 19,7 cm (with handle)
- Diameter 7,8 x 4,6 cm (at the top), 5,9 x 4 cm (base)
- Width 3,6 x 4,8 cm
- Depth 8,5 cm
- Hollow foot 1,7 cm
- Flanders
- 15th – early 16th century

See no 10 at the chapter "Collective specification of the several types".



Rather large bronze pentagonal holy-water bucket, with flattened back for vertical position or for wall-suspension

Polished body.

Interchangeable handle in rolled sheet-brass of later date.

The rectangular handle junctions, with oblique comb-shaped filing strokes, are simultaneously cast with the body, one junction having been broken at the time and soldered again.

- Height 11 cm (without handle), 20 cm (with handle)
- Diameter 11 x 9,6 cm (at the top), 9,5 x 6,8 cm (below)
- Depth 9,6 cm
- Hollow foot (depth 4 mm).
- Weight 1,000 kg
- Flanders
- 15th – early 16th century

See no 10 at the chapter "Collective specification of the several types".

