

DAVID & CONSTANCE YATES

EUROPEAN SCULPTURE, OIL SKETCHES AND DRAWINGS

PLACIDE-BENOIT-MARIE POUSSIELGUE-RUSAND

(Paris 1824-1889 Paris)

Chalice

Gilt silver

Height: 10 inches (25.4 cm)

Diameter of cup: 3 ¾ inches (9.5 cm)

Diameter of base: 5 ¾ inches (14.6 cm)

Weight: 28.1 ounces (796 grams)

Poussielgue-Rusand and Minerva poinçons on outer rim of the cup
c. 1860

Placide Poussielgue-Rusand modeled the decorative elements of this chalice after those made in France in the second half of the seventeenth century. The chalice is a rare example of a nineteenth century goldsmith working in the manner of the seventeenth century, a style that was not “in vogue” at the time, when patrons preferred the more current neo-gothic style. Poussielgue-Rusand’s passion for the art of the late seventeenth century is reflected in the chalice’s abundance of cherub heads framed by outspread wings and shell forms. The extremely high quality of the chasing, and the quantity of silver used (almost a kilogram), make this chalice one of the most precious works of Poussielgue-Rusand’s oeuvre.

The iconographic program is unusual in that it focuses on the instruments of Christ’s Passion, the *Arma Christi*, which are associated with the events leading up to the Crucifixion. Three fields, separated by cherub heads, encircle the cup. The first field displays the reed, the purple mantle, the crown of thorns resting on three nails, the pliers, and the rope. The second includes the soldiers’ lantern used during Christ’s arrest, the pitcher and basin with which Pilate washed his hands, the brazier at the court of the high-priest’s palace, the pike and the arms of the praetorian guards. The third includes Veronica’s veil, the dice that soldiers threw for Christ’s clothes, and the chalice held by an angel for Jesus at the Garden of Olives.

On the foot there is a similar disposition of cherub heads alternating with three fields containing objects associated with the Passion. The first field contains the column of the flagellation and the flail, the cock that crowed three times after Peter’s denial, the ear of the grand priest’s servant and the sword with which Peter cut it off. The second shows the stone of unction, now in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem, on which are placed vases of unguents and perfumed oil. The third is devoted to Golgotha and includes the cross, the lance, the pike and sponge, and finally, the ladder.

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This iconography reflects the spirituality of the French school, which focused its theological contemplation on the Passion of Christ, its promise of salvation, the teachings of Jesus, and above all the institution of the Eucharist, of which the chalice is the instrument.

No other example of this chalice is known in France or elsewhere.

Liturgical art was particularly important in 19th century France. Craftsmen, painters, architects and sculptors devoted much of their output to meeting demand from the Catholic Church, which was spearheading a pastoral revival and wanted to replace objects lost during the French Revolution. With support from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and contributions from the faithful and the clergy, goldsmithing and paraments became fertile soil for experimentation and innovation.

In 1800, Placide's grandfather, Mathieu Poussielgue, moved to France from Malta, where the family had lived from around the mid-17th century. Accompanying him were his three children, including Placide's father, Antoine-Jean-Baptiste, born 15 March 1797. On 2 June 1823, Jean-Baptiste married Marguerite Rusand, a daughter of the Lyon printer Mathieu-Placide Rusand, and took the name Poussielgue-Rusand. When she died in 1833, Jean-Baptiste opened an ecclesiastical and classical bookshop on rue Hautefeuille that included a section of gold and silver religious artwork.

Placide Poussielgue-Rusand, the son from his father's first marriage, became a goldsmith's apprentice to Choiselat-Gallien. Between 1845 and 1847 Placide purchased models and merchandise from Choiselat-Gallien (103,656 francs) and, in 1849, his clientele and goodwill (100,000 francs). Poussielgue-Rusand registered his mark in 1847. He achieved his earliest success with Arthur Martin and, as a result, received many government commissions. He worked on Monsignor Dreux-Brezé's chapel—highly admired at the 1851 Universal Exhibition in London. His high altar at Saint-Martin-d'Ainay in Lyon, designed by Questel, won the *médaille de 1^{ere} classe* in 1855.

Poussielgue-Rusand gained widespread recognition after he began working with Viollet-le-Duc, with whom he collaborated on some of the most prestigious works of art for Notre-Dame de Paris, including the reliquaries of the Crown of the Thorns and the Holy Nail (1862). In 1870, Viollet-le-Duc and Poussielgue-Rusand sent a group of objects to an exhibition in Rome, for which they received the grand prize. These works included a ciborium based on the one in San Clemente, Rome; the repoussé altar of Notre-Dame de Paris; a gilt bronze and enameled missal-stand; sacred vessels; an enameled episcopal brooch; statuettes and the Paschal candlestick for Saint Geneviève, Paris. To keep pace with such high demand,

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Poussielgue-Rusand developed industrial manufacturing processes, in particular a method to make imitation cloisonné enamels. By around 1865, the factory had four different workshops:

“the gold and silversmithing workshop had 20 employees, the chasing and repoussé workshop 10, the mounting workshop 22, the bronze chasing workshop 24, plus six lathe operators, an embosser, hammerers, two draftsmen and a steam engine, not to mention around 100 smelters, enamellers, engravers, planers, polishers, silver- and gold-platers, etc. working outside the factory.”¹

After 1870, Poussielgue-Rusand participated in various universal exhibitions, including Vienna (1873), Philadelphia (1876) and Paris (1878), where he was on the organizing committee for gold and silver religious artwork. The goldsmith reached the pinnacle of success at the Rome Exhibition (Pope Leo XIII’s Jubilee in 1888) and the Paris Exhibition of 1889, the year of his death.

¹ Demande présentée par M. Fossin pour le grade de chevalier de la Légion d’honneur à Placide Poussielgue-Rusand, 1862. Arch. Nat., F¹²5243.

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