

VASE BY CLÉMENT MASSIER (1845–1917)

GOLFE-JUAN, FRANCE, C. 1900

EARTHENWARE WITH LUSTRE GLAZE

810 X 510 CM

Clément Massier was born in Vallauris, near Cannes in Alpes-Maritimes, in 1845. He learned the technique and art of pottery at his father's kilns at nearby Golfe-Juan, and subsequently took over direction of his father's factory in about 1883. The firm became well known for its development of lustre glazes, which it first produced in the mid 1880s, and Massier's influence led to the establishment of new workshops for lustre-glaze ceramics. The technique of metallic lustre was possibly rediscovered by Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer, who was artistic director of the Massier factory between 1887 and 1895. Lévy-Dhurmer had been born in Algiers and was a collector of Islamic ceramics, the original inspiration for the metallic glaze experiments.

Massier's metallic glazes and his decorative use of lustrous colours served

as a model for many other potters in Europe and elsewhere. During the same period, similar iridescent effects were developed in the making of blown glass objects, most notably in the works of Émile Gallé in France and Louis Comfort Tiffany in the United States. Indeed, a rare example of Tiffany's collaboration with a European artist is an oil lamp in which Tiffany combined his own iridescent glass shade and metal mounts with a Clément Massier lustred ceramic base.

The ROM vase is monumental in scale, and appears to have been made for mounting on a base of some kind. These two facts suggest that it might have been made for an international exposition, possibly the 1899 Paris Expositions Universelles, at which Massier is known to have exhibited. The following year, he established a retail outlet in Paris at 36, avenue de l'Opéra. His ceramics were also sold in Paris at L'Art Nouveau, the influential gallery established by Samuel Bing in 1895, which gave its name to the new styles in decorative arts and architecture.



The ROM has one other piece by Massier, a tiny pot which is on display in the European Galleries Ceramic Study Room. It is glazed with at least four differently coloured metallic lustres, beautifully showing the range of colours that could be achieved. This diminutive pot stands just a few inches tall, so it is possible that the Museum now has examples of Massier's largest and smallest designs.

Aquatic scenes and underwater life were popular subjects for late 19th century designers, who were influenced by the discoveries of Charles Darwin and fascinated by the concept that terrestrial life originated in the sea. Undersea exploration was also of topical interest, encouraged by the enormous popularity of Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, published in 1869. In England, the Martin Brothers used the flowing lines of swimming fish and streaming waterweeds to set off free-flowing ceramic forms. In France, Gallé exploited the watery illusions of handblown glass to produce wondrous

objects decorated with sea creatures of all types.

Massier's vase is quite restrained in its subject matter, with just two small fish, probably carp, on each side, swimming through several different types of seaweed. The four fish are raised on the surface of the vase, and are glazed in a slightly brighter shade of gold. The seaweeds are in various shades of gold, and the background throughout is darker although still in the gold-bronze range.

Japanese art had a strong influence on Western decorative arts of the second half of the 19th century, following the discovery and popularization of Japanese coloured woodcuts in France in the 1850s by engraver Félix Bracquemond. Although the Japanese influence in this Massier vase is largely limited to the subject matter of the decoration and the glaze colours, many other of his works demonstrate a more profound engagement of Japanese antecedents in both form and content. A large plate from the same period, in the collection of the Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza, uses similar

golden glazes and shades of copper in a simple tableau of pine tree, water, and sky, which clearly refers to Japanese woodcuts and lacquerwork. Massier's lustrous metallic glazes are used to great effect in this plate to suggest a shimmering sunset.

The form of the vase is highly unusual. While the body of the vessel is of classic proportions, it is augmented at the top with two large handle-like but non-functional protuberances. They resemble the shape of a shark's fin, and, if that is the intent, they are simply a continuation of the aquatic theme. But they are also reminiscent of forms used in Islamic pottery and metalwork, and might therefore refer to the Islamic origins of the Massier lustre glazes. Whatever the source, this unusual juxtaposition of forms adds to the drama and impact of the vase.

—VIRGINIA WRIGHT

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