

The Delicate Craft of Enamelling.

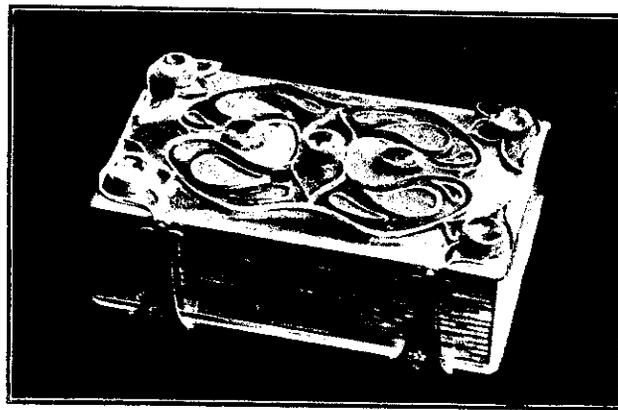
By G. M. D. LANE.

ONLY in very recent years have the various talents that women possess and employ been utilised in those very crafts which would seem pre-eminently to require the deftness of hand, lightness of touch and fancy, and appreciation of tone and colour in which their sex excels. Now, however, slowly perhaps, but very surely, women are making their influence felt and proving themselves dangerous rivals to their male competitors in the delicate-crafts of metal-work, gem-setting, and enamelling, work which, more than any other, demands a taste and delicacy which we rarely find combined with the solidity and heaviness of the productions of the English man-jeweller. It may further be claimed for women that, in the case of enamels, they possess a clearer and truer sense of the colours and designs which will most fitly harmonise with the general tone of the "subject." For the aim of the artistic jeweller is not to produce mere ornaments, but ornaments for the particular person who is to wear them. Such a task is easier, perhaps, for a French mind than for an English one; yet, strange to say, Rene Lalique, the great apostle, nay, almost the founder, of New Art in metal work, fails in this, and in this only. His compositions are, in many cases, perfect gems of workmanship and triumphs of design replete with originality, yet far fitter for the collector's table or a glass case in the gallery of a museum than for the purpose they were originally intended to serve. For none but an Eastern woman could carry off the grotesqueness, the barbarous whimsicality of some of the fantasies which this master designs for ornaments. Surely had the genius of Lalique been placed under the guidance of the innate taste of artistic womanhood, this fault might have been avoided in work which has everything else to command our admiration.

This being so, it is strange to find that in such a book as the "Englishwoman's Year Book" for 1901, a perfect storehouse of information as to the trades and professions open to women, there is no allusion whatever to enamelling, or, with the exception of a brief paragraph on silver repoussé work, to any sort of

deftness of hand required is no common gift; and it has to be accompanied by unwearied perseverance and vigilance, while the enameller, to be a true artist, requires a trained discernment of design and colour, little, if at all, inferior to that demanded of a painter, and must add the power of working not by what she sees, but by what she foresees, since the colour of the enamels before application is widely different from the tint they assume after exposure to the flame of the furnace. When we add to this the physical strength required to combat the uncomfortable conditions of which we shall speak later, it will be realised that the craft of an enameller is not one to be rashly adopted.

Attention has been drawn lately to the work of Mrs Edith A. Dick, in metals, gem-setting, and enamels, and the accompanying illustrations show a few specimens executed by her and her assistants in her studio at 77, Ladbrooke Road, W., some of which were on exhibition during last season at the rooms



SILVER AND ENAMEL BONBONNIERE SET WITH AMETHYSTS.

of the Fine Art Society. The studies of this artist under the leading French exponents of her craft and the length of her residence in France, her native land, have borne fruit in her work, but she was originally pupil of Mr D. Sandheim, whose keen artistic sense and thoroughness of workmanship made him an unrivalled teacher, and whose recent death is an irreparable loss to all who knew and appreciated him, whether as artist or as man.

There is nothing pretensions about her studio, which we visited. The apparatus of the craft consists of a furnace, a jeweller's bench, and a couple of deal tables crowded with tools and unfinished work.

The operations, likewise, in the description, sound simplicity itself. The enamel consists of "a pure crystal glass of frit, ground up with a fine calx of lead and tin prepared for the purpose, with the addition usually of white soft of tartar." These ingredients are the ground-work of all enamels, which are coloured by the addition of various substances, of which manganese and zaffer are most commonly employed. At the very least 20 different hues of enamel are required, and these are supplied in lumps about four inches in diameter. Formerly, these were chiefly obtained from Venice or Holland, but now the best enamels come from Switzerland, France, and Austria. The enamel is reduced from the solid lump to the consistency of the finest sand by persevering use of the pestle and mortar. This operation forms the prelude to each day's work; for the enamel, when pulverised, loses its colour rapidly, and consequently no more is treated each morning than will be used during the day.

Some enamellers keep their powdered enamel in air-tight bottles, but the results of using old enamel are never quite satisfactory. It is then repeatedly washed with fresh water to remove any impurities, or the smallest trace of dust. This prepares it for application to the metal; for this purpose it is slightly moistened and is applied with a spatula; then it has to be dried with no less care, to prepare it for the process of fusing for which the furnace is brought to a red heat. The furnace itself consists of an oven of fire brick. The invention of gas has greatly simplified this part of the process. For, at one time enamellers were dependent on the fire of a lamp supplied not with oil, but with horse-grease—candle oil, as it was termed in the trade, and in France coke is still used for heating. The success or failure of the work depends entirely upon the exercise of unlimited care and inexhaustible patience. The washing, the drying, and the fusing must all be conscientiously carried out to the minutest detail, while the delay of one second in removing the piece fired from the furnace would ruin it irremediably, for, as in fresco painting, a false step can never be retraced except by the lengthy process of removing the enamel with acid and coating the surface anew. Dust is perhaps the deadliest and most insidious enemy of the enameller. At every stage of the process it besets her, and the settling of a single mote, only observable through the lens, would be fatal, for the speck of dust, being inflammable, takes fire in the furnace, and an un-

stones of unmistakably early Victorian design, which seemed as out of place among the delicate productions of the



A HAND MIRROR IN BRONZE AND ENAMEL.

enameller's art as a suet pudding in the menu of a dinner party. However, I found that it had been sent for alteration, so I was curious to learn its ultimate fate. The design was displayed before me, and I was equally delighted and surprised to see the clumsy ornament transformed into the lightest and daintiest of pendants in gold cloisonne enamel with the stones and enamels and pearls subtly woven into a complete scheme of colour. Near it lay some finished original work—a pendant of rubies and diamonds in a setting as fragile as a cobweb, and a pair of long diamond and peridot earrings. Nothing pleased me more than a hand-glass, "Junio's Mirror,"—a peacock with spread tail and plumage of royal blue, in whose proudly raised crest sparkled tiny rubies. It was not surprising to hear that this bird had gained the first prize at a recent exhibition judged by Mr Philip Crounham, author of "The Art of Enamelling," the only really practical book which has been written on the subject.

It is matter for profound regret that all the larger and more elaborate pieces of work had been undertaken for the sheer pleasure of production, as the English public makes little demand for the costlier kind of decorative work. A staunch and stubborn conservatism bars the way, and innovations and originality can gain no admittance. Yet, I am told by one of the leading firms, the demand for enamelled jewellery of the finest description is greatly on the increase, and some comfort may be gained from that fact, since it would indeed be deplorable if so delicate and ancient a craft were to lack any encouragement which the connoisseurs of the twentieth century can supply.



PENDANT OPALS, PEARLS AND ENAMEL.

jeweller's work. We may acquiesce in the fact that no woman plays the trombone professionally; but here is a field of work where feminine qualities are especially required, and yet as a profession for women the making of jewellery has hitherto had no recognition.

Not that it is a craft in which any woman can succeed; far from it, The

slightly hole is thus produced. Not even the breath of the operator can be suffered to impinge on the surface, and care must also be taken lest any injurious fumes should ascend from the furnace to spoil the colour of the work on hand. Besides this, the workpeople must wear special masks to protect their eyes and face from the intense heat and dazzling glow of the furnace. This glare, so injurious to the sight, is one of the physical discomforts of enamelling to which we have alluded. The other is the heat in which the work must be done; the worker can never be far from a furnace heated up to red heat, while the arrangement of any system of ventilation is difficult, if not impossible—since air-currents bring dust, and dust is fatal to the work.

While the operations were in progress, I was struck by observing on one of the tables a heavy gold brooch set with



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