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UNBOXING THE CASKET:
A HISTORY OF THE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY
LIMOGES ENAMELED JEWEL BOX IN THE
SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

Yusi (Joyce) Zhou

Mentor: William Wallace

The object at the heart of this thesis is a sixteenth-century enameled casket from Limoges, France, in the collection of the Saint Louis Art Museum. The casket features 13 enameled plaques: 11 rectangular panels depict narratives from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and two trapezoid gable panels contain profile portraits of individuals surrounded by ornamental vegetation. On flat sheets of copper primed with black enamel, the enameller formed figures and landscape in the grisaille enamel technique, with accented details in gold. Little is known about the casket, which was only exhibited for a few months after it was acquired in 1988 and has only been surveyed in an informal setting by two museum professionals. By proposing the casket's date of production, function, owner, and original format, I explore how sixteenth-century French nobles used decorative objects to further their political, economic, and social goals. Drawing on historical and art-historical scholarship, formal analyses of the object, and comparisons with similar examples, I propose that the enamels were part of a now-deteriorated casket and that a member of the sixteenth-century French nobility commissioned the object and presented it as a marriage gift to his or her future spouse. Using the casket and its Ovidian imagery as a starting point, the thesis examines how early modern decorative objects help us understand the motivations for art patronage by the nobility, the gender roles within aristocratic marriages, and the ways in which the urges and desires of aristocratic women were perceived, controlled, and appeased in the interest of producing a legitimate male heir.