PORTRAIT OF A POTTER

BY JOHN GOLDSMITH PHILLIPS
Associate Curator of Renaissance and Modern Art

A portrait bust presumed to be that of Bernard Palissy, in the Museum's collection of sculpture, focuses our attention on this many-sided genius of the French Renaissance who in Victorian times was likened to Leonardo da Vinci. Although in more recent days Bernard's star has lost some of its luster, we may profitably re-examine the man and his work.

Fortunately he left as his written testament the *Recepte véritable* (1563), "by which all Frenchmen can learn to multiply and augment their treasures," and the *Discours admirable* (1580), which contains his celebrated treatise on the making of pottery called "De l'art de terre." Few who read them will question that their author was a rare spirit. Unlike many of his contemporaries—the butterfly duc de Joyeuse, for instance—whose ways are so strange to us of the twentieth century that they seem to be of the stuff of dreams, Bernard emerges from his pages as lifelike as anyone's neighbor. The qualities which set him apart from the ruck of humanity were indomitable courage, absolute honesty, and, rarest of all, a mind eager to grasp the truths evident in nature. Of a homespun cut, Bernard Palissy was never commonplace.

America with its Puritan and rural background knows the type better even than France, and France, it should be noted, never produced another like him.

Palissy was born about the year 1510 in the small town of Agen in southwestern France and as a young man was apprenticed to a glass-painter. The preoccupation with science which so dominated his later years was evident in his youth when he traveled on foot throughout France observing and pondering upon the natural phenomena of the countryside. About 1539 he settled in Saintes, a town near the west coast of France and some sixty miles north of Bordeaux. He now painted portraits as well as stained glass and was also a surveyor. About 1546, when the Reformation first came to Saintes, he joined the Calvinist Church, thereby showing an independent spirit. He was to show courage when, in 1562 and afterwards, he was persecuted for his faith. Bernard Palissy brought fame to Saintes, for it was there that he learned to make the pottery that still bears his name.

How he came to be a potter is a fascinating tale which he himself tells us in his treatise "De l'art de terre." One day in Saintes he came upon "an earthen cup, turned and enamelled with so much beauty" that he resolved to discover the secret of its manufacture and thereby make his fortune. As this bit of earthenware became the turning point in Bernard's career, there has been much speculation about it. Some believe it was Chinese porcelain, but it seems more likely that it was a piece of European pottery.

In 1539, when Palissy was establishing himself in Saintes, some fine ceramics were already being made in France. There were small factories in the great cities of Rouen and Lyon, and one also in Saint Porchaire, a small town not far from Saintes. It may well be that the cup that so roused Palissy was of Saint Porchaire faience.

Palissy's account of his labors in creating earthenware vessels should be required reading for the fainthearted, for Job himself was no more sternly tried. He learned the hard way, welcoming difficulties just to conquer them. "One cannot pursue or put into execution any design and work it out with beauty or perfection," Palissy wrote, "except with great and extreme labor, which never goes alone but is always accompanied by a host of anxieties." He experimented for years with scant success, "as a man groping in the dark." At one time he thought he had solved his problem: he had built a furnace that worked, designed his vessels, and coated them with enamels of his own invention.

"I had held my creditors in hope," he said,
“that they would be paid out of the money which would proceed from the pieces made in the said furnace; which was one of the reasons why several began to hasten to me the morning when I was to commence the drawing of my batch. Yet by this means, my sorrows were redoubled: inasmuch as, in drawing the said work, I received nothing but shame and con-
fusion; for my pieces were all bestrewn with little morsels of flint, which were attached so firmly to each vessel, and so combined with the enamel, that when one passed the hand over it, the said flints cut like razors; and although my work was in this way lost, there were still some who would buy it at a mean price; but, because that would have been a descrying and abasing of my honor, I broke in pieces the entire batch from the said furnace, and lay down in melancholy—not without cause, for I had no longer any means to feed my family; I had nothing but reproaches in the house; in place of consolation they gave me maledictions; my neighbors, who heard of this affair, said I was nothing but a fool, and that I might have had more than eight francs for the things I had broken: and all this talk was brought to mingle with my grief." At another time Palissy tore up the floor boards and even used the family furniture to keep up the fires of his furnace. The great Benvenuto Cellini, in his struggles with bronze-casting, once resorted to a similar expedient to maintain a white-hot flame. However, the resemblance between the profligate Italian master and the Calvinist of Saintes begins and ends there.

At long last, in spite of his clumsiness and ill-starred attempts, Bernard succeeded in making a kind of glazed pottery. His initial success was with jasper ware, so called from the color of the glaze. Now that he had mastered his medium, he found a patron in Anne de Montmorency, the renowned Constable of France. The story of his subsequent successes as a potter need not be retold here, for in this brief article it is our purpose merely to outline the character of the man. It is enough to note that in 1555 Montmorency commissioned him to make a grotto of glazed earthenware for the garden of his château of Écouen (a work left unfinished), that in 1562 the title "Inventeur des rustiques figulines du roi" was bestowed upon him, and that in 1566 the queen mother, Catherine de' Medici, called him to Paris, installing him in his own pottery works in the Tuileries. The remaining twenty-five years of his life centered around Paris.

Master Bernard, or Bernard of the Tuileries, as he also came to be called, was from then on not only a favorite of Catherine and her royal sons but a man of renown, who was universally respected by scholars and scientists of the age. From 1575 to 1584 he gave annually a series of lectures on natural history, at which the best minds in France were likely to be in attendance. Bernard's subjects were many and varied. His ideas on the nature of springs and underground water were far in advance of his time, and he was one of the first men in Europe to understand the significance of fossils. He was concerned too with problems of the composition of soil and could give good advice today to many farmers. Yet, despite his undeniable learning, one may wonder whether many in his Parisian audiences were not attracted to him just because he differed so sharply from them, both in ideals and in manner of expression. Apparently life in Paris had not changed him one iota, and nothing is more refreshing to the true cosmopolitan than the unregenerate son of the soil.

Although he remained a stanch Calvinist, his royal patrons protected him from religious persecution until the fanatical outburst of 1589, when he was imprisoned. He died in the Bastille de Buy in 1589 or 1590 at the age of about eighty. We find no record of his burial.

So much for his life. The Museum's painted terracotta bust of the man we believe to be Bernard Palissy shows a bearded elder. His expression is grave and speculative. He wears his hat with an "artistic" negligence unusual in that elegant period. The doublet which shows beneath the fur-trimmed robe is held together by frogs of a type called brandenburgs and surmounted by a standing collar. When the bust arrived in the Museum as part of the Blumenthal collection, it had already been described as a portrait of Palissy. But it was then coated with a thick modern paint which not only seriously disfigured it but caused such doubts to be cast on its authenticity that it was not shown in the exhibition of the Blumenthal material. Now that the ugly repaint has been removed, revealing the modeling, the quality of the terracotta, and even traces of original coloring, all reservations about it vanish.
Until the bust first appeared in the catalogue of the Blumenthal collection, our only notion of what Palissy looked like came from an inferior miniature in the Cluny Museum in Paris. This painting bears his name and, although its known history goes back no more than a hundred years, it is generally believed to be an authentic likeness. It is the basis for the identification of the bust.

The means of identification are curious. It is not just a matter of physical resemblance, for, although the subjects of both miniature and bust are mature, bearded men, there were many elderly men with beards in France besides Palissy. The clinching evidence is elsewhere; it lies in the dress.

Our present-day regimentation of clothing is a matter of recent date, stemming from the Industrial Revolution. The man of the Renaissance dressed as an individual. It would have been inconceivable for a sixteenth-century Pierre or Jean to wear exactly the same suit worn by Jacques or Charles. Now in both these portraits the clothing is essentially the same.
There is the same doublet with identical epauletts, identical buttons angled in the same direction, identical brandenburgs. Even the same details of embroidery design show in the edging. Such a repetition of specific details cannot be put down to coincidence. We can only conclude that the subjects of both portraits are identical and that if the inscription on the miniature does not lie our bust is a likeness of Palissy.

It was a common practice in Bernard's time to place busts in niches over tombs. Ours might be such a memorial, for it is composed to be seen from below and is shaped as if to fit in a niche. If it does indeed come from a monument to Palissy, we have an explanation for the resemblance between bust and miniature. The painting, which is much less skillfully done than the sculpture, could well have been the work of a painter who, in doing a series of portraits of notables, used the bust as his model. We know that portrait sequences of this type were common in the past.

If the bust is from Palissy's grave monument, presumably it was made about the time of his death—1589 or 1590—when the potter was about eighty years old. The ancient features suggest such an advanced age, and the clothing is cut in a fashion that an old man might then have worn. Although it first appeared about 1570, this style of dress carried on and could have been used by an old man as late as 1590.

None of these points are direct evidence that the bust represents Palissy. On the other hand, they are all favorable and, when considered together, highly persuasive. Certainly if anyone should attempt to portray him on a basis of what we know of his life and character he would find it difficult to better the likeness of the bust.

Who the sculptor was remains a mystery. Unfortunately this particular period of French sculpture has not been as thoroughly studied as most other periods. And, as portrait sculpture of that era is particularly rare, no comparable material exists to suggest an attribution. So for the moment we can do no more than indicate that he was a French master of the last quarter of the sixteenth century, who was highly skilled in his art and gifted in psychological portraiture.

The sculpture itself must be accepted as one of the few fine portrait busts of the French Renaissance. We believe it will come to be recognized as the one true likeness of Bernard Palissy.

Palissy's account of the invention of his earthenware is quoted, with slight changes, from the English translation of "De l'art de terre" in Henry Morley's Bernard Palissy (London, Chapman and Hall, 1852).

The miniature portrait of Palissy shown above is reproduced from A Delectable Garden, by Bernard Palissy, translated by Helen Morgenthau Fox (The Watch Hill Press, 1931).