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THE MARKET FOR
OLD MASTER DRAWINGS

STOLEN ART REPORT

JEAN MONRO—INTERIOR DESIGNER

18TH CENTURY FRENCH PORCELAIN

GEORGIAN FURNITURE SUPPLEMENT

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Portrait of The Comtesse
Narbonne Lara by Elisabeth
Vigée-Lebrun (1755)

Black chalk heightened with
and white chalk on beige
440mm x 260 mm (17 x 10 in.)
See Contents, page 10 for further information



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D·E·C·O·R·A·T·I·V·E *elaborations*

Scagliola originated in the 17th century as a form of decoration resembling mosaic work. Vanessa Nicolson explains the Italian technique and inspects the market for collectors.

Travelling in Italy in 1760, James Adam noted in his diary: 'The scagliola is curious and could be used to answer many different purposes, for example columns resembling different marbles, for tables resembling mosaic work and for most elegant floors for baths and low apartments.' Almost a century earlier John and Elizabeth Lauderdale were supervising works on the interior of their home, Ham House in Richmond. In what is known as the 'Queen's Closet', the panels surrounding the fireplace and on the window are the earliest examples of scagliola in Britain. Black with green foliage, they date from the early 1670s. The initials 'J.E.L.' together with a ducal coronet are incorporated in the design. It remains something of a mystery how the Lauderdale, or their master of works, had come across the technique of scagliola at such an early date. They had not travelled further than Paris, and the technique was unknown in Britain.

The term scagliola is derived from the Italian *scaglia*, meaning chips of marble and is sometimes called *meschia*, from the many mixtures of colours which were introduced. It is composed of pulverised selenite, applied to a wet gesso ground, fixed under intense heat and highly polished. Used by the Romans and possibly the Greeks before them, it is thought to have been invented by the Egyptians, who employed a coloured and polished plaster in their tombs. Given recognition in early 17th century Tuscany, in the town of Carpi (named in 1707 'the city of inventions'), it proved an excellent substitute for marble and mosaic, and at a fraction of the cost. The first objects in

scagliola, the Palazzo Pitti and the Museo dell'Opificio in Florence (Figure 2). His output was characterised by delicate effects of colour: pale blues, light browns,

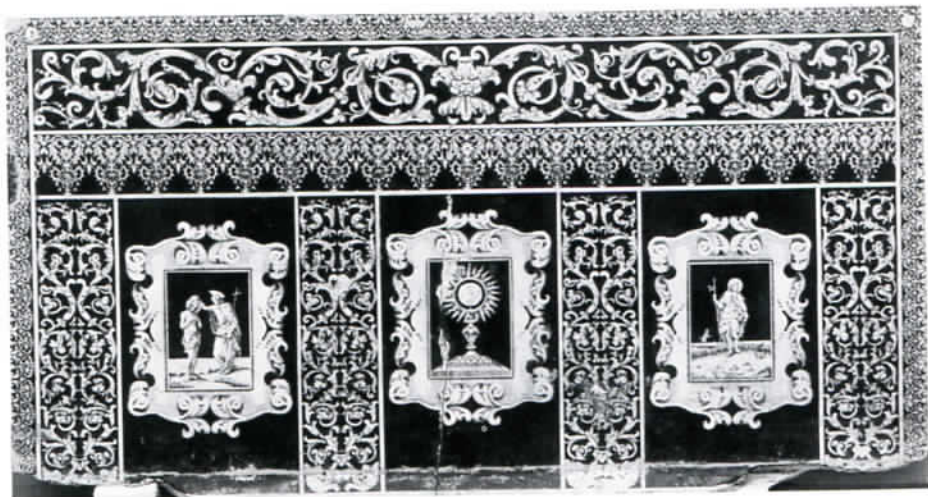


FIGURE 1. Altar front, made in Carpi, Tuscany, home of scagliola. Made by a follower of Guido Fassi, inventor of scagliola. Early 17th century. 100 x 200 cm (39 x 78½ in).

scagliola were destined for churches (Figure 1); the splendid altar in Carpi cathedral is a monument to the technique. The first experiments on altarpieces or panels were in black and white, soon to be developed into pieces filled with colour.

In the mid 17th century the plague virtually wiped out the population of Carpi, and scagliola reappears in Tuscany with an Englishman called Henry ('Enrico') Hugford who emigrated to Italy in the late 17th century. He was a watchmaker to Cosimo III, later becoming a monk and eventually in 1743 the Abbot of the monastery of Vallombrosa in the hills outside Florence. He supplied works to the major sovereigns of Europe and his fame spread. His work can be seen in the two major public collections owning

smokey greys. (A recent detailed study of Hugford's work was published in *Artistica/Critica dell'Arte in Toscana*, July 1991.)

Scagliola now passed from an ecclesiastical to a domestic setting: small items of furniture, decorative objects, panels, etc. Hugford's views and landscapes so impressed the Medici Grand Duke of the time, Pietro Leopoldo, that he visited him and insisted he take on a pupil. This assistant, the Livornese Lamberto Cristano Gori (1730-1801) perfected the technique and with his talent as a draughtsman was able to produce intri-

cate pictures in scagliola of flower arrangements, copies of 16th and 17th century paintings, as well as the already popular still lifes and landscapes.

Another Livornese, Giuseppe Cianchi, excelled in reproducing the minutest detail in his scagliola landscapes. He could imitate the shadows and hues of rocks, or the sea and the sky. His pupil and assistant Pietro Stoppioni continued the *Illustrious Men* series started by Gori and also concentrated on mythological subjects. His work became well known throughout Europe.

Lucca, Livorno, Florence: these three Tuscan towns were responsible for the main output of scagliola. The greatest domestic scagliola can be dated to the 17th century, whereas the 18th century was a time for export ware. The Italian craftsmen soon caught on to a staple source of income; the cultured Grand Tourist had arrived. British country houses contain perfect examples of furniture, mantelpieces, panels, all decorated in scagliola, shipped over by young men who had admired these objects on their travels. Petworth House in West Sussex had a particularly fine pair of tables decorated in scagliola which came from Italy in the early 18th century. Sir Matthew Featherstonhaugh of Uppark in Sussex had to wait three or four years for his pair of Rococo tables with scagliola tops ordered from Don Pietro Belloni in Rome in the early 1750s.

One Grand Tourist, William Constable of Burton, was so taken by the Florentine inlay work he had seen that on his return to England he rather sensibly imported an expert in scagliola to decorate his house. Domenico Bartoli received an annual



FIGURE 2. (left) Scagliola panel by Padre Enrico Hugford, mid 18th century. 37.5 x 30 cm (14 3/4 x 11 3/4 in). Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Florence.

FIGURE 3. (below) Livorno Canal by Giuseppe Cianchi, 18th century. 27.5 x 38 cm (10 3/4 x 15 in). Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Florence.

FIGURE 4. Detail of fireplace by Bossi, late 18th century. 138 x 152 cm (54 x 60 in). Bossi was an Italian craftsman resident in Dublin from c.1785-98. Sotheby's.



salary of £54 12s. from 1763-66 for which he decorated chimneypieces and furniture. Four tables by him at Burton are inlaid with decorations reflecting the interests, activities and travels of the Constable family. Possibly to guarantee

his employment, Bartoli always maintained great secrecy over the technique of scagliola, never revealing which raw materials he used (see article in *Country Life*, 29 April 1982). Another Italian to take advantage of the British taste for



FIGURE 5. Round table covered with black scagliola in which the overall design has already been marked with deep incisions which will be filled in with white or coloured scagliola paste. DIAM 150 cm (59 in). This will then be reworked to obtain shaded hues or engraved details.



FIGURE 6. 19th century tabletop with view of Piazza della Signoria, Florence. DIAM 82 cm (32 1/2 in). The four cameos show heads of Dante, Michelangelo, Leonardo and Benvenuto Cellini. Made by the Della Valle Brothers.

scagliola was a man called Bossi who made his way to Ireland in the 1780s and decorated mantelpieces and table tops with neoclassical swags and motifs (Figure 4).

The production of scagliola almost disappeared in the 19th century, although tourists were still supplied with scagliola objects as souvenirs (Figure 5). The craft has re-emerged in a thriving workshop in Florence run by an artisan called Bianco Bianchi, who helped by his son and daughter, not only restore old pieces of scagliola, but create new ones. Bianco Bianchi, whose customers include Princess Michael of Kent, began by collecting antique scagliola after the war. It took him years to discover all the tricks of a nearly forgotten and very varied technique.

A block of scagliola before it has been

FIGURE 7. Detail of table top with black and white scagliola decoration representing a hunting scene by contemporary craftsman Bianco Bianchi. 70 x 137 cm (27½ x 54 in).

Figures 1 and 5-7 courtesy of Bianco Bianchi, Florence.

worked upon looks like a grey conglomeration of crystals and earth. It must be burnt in the oven at a very high temperature, then ground to an impalpable powder. It is subsequently mixed with natural glues and coloured with mineral powders (the same used by Renaissance artists in frescoes) and it becomes like a paste. The paste is then used to fill the grooves previously carved in the plain marble sheet or support (Figure 5) and is allowed to dry; this is sufficient for a black and white pattern (Figure 7). More elaborate decorations can be engraved into the dried paste; these are then filled in with a new paste, mixed like a painter or water-colourist would, with a new colour. The decoration, therefore, is made by mixing coloured powders rather than juxtaposing semi-precious stones as in *pietra dura*. The final lustre of a scagliola surface is obtained by polishing it with a pumice-stone and water.

Looking at today's market for collectors, a 17th century Italian cabinet inset with scagliola panels depicting birds and branches with imitation 'marble' decorative effects came up for sale at Phillips on 24th April 1990 with an estimate of £20,000-30,000. In fact it exceeded all expectations, selling for £80,000. Objects of this kind in perfect condition are few and far between, although scagliola table tops and mantelpieces do appear in the salerooms and a number of dealers stock them. They usually fetch between £10,000-30,000 according to condition and subject (depictions of fruit and birds fetch much more than foliage alone).

The two problems with scagliola are that it may be mistaken for *pietra dura*, or worse, for a table top painted to look like *pietra dura*. Both are highly polished and use similar designs, mostly of birds and flowers. It must be emphasised that scagliola is a skill of painting rather than lapidary work, and the fineness of detail should reflect that.

Secondly, and this is more common, there is the problem of mistaking modern



scagliola for old. The success of Bianco Bianchi's workshop over the last 10 years has meant that the market has been inundated with very skilled contemporary designs which, once passed through different hands, could be sold (through lack of knowledge as much as dishonesty) as antique. The only way to tell is by condition and the quality of the colour tone; the old colours were more muted, less bright than they are today.

Information

The firm of Hearn & Klasicki also manufacture objects in scagliola and provide courses in the technique of varying duration. For more information contact Sally Hearn, The Sifting Room, Tythings Commercial Centre, Southgate Road, Wincanton, Somerset. Tel. 0963-34346.

Addresses

- Didier Aaron**, 21 Ryder Street, London SW1Y 6PX.
Tel. 071-839 4716/7.
Bianco Bianchi, Viale Europa 117, Florence, Italy.
Tel. 010-39-55-686118.
Christie's (auctioneers), 8 King Street, London SW1 6TQ. Tel. 071-839 9060.
L'Aiglon Gallery, 220 Westbourne Grove, London W11 2RH. Tel. 071-727 6596.
Mallett at Bourdon House, 2 Davies Street, Berkeley Square, London W1Y 1LJ. Tel. 071-629 2444/5.
Partridge (Fine Arts), 144-146 New Bond Street, London W1. Tel. 071-629 0834.
Phillips (auctioneers), 101 New Bond Street, London W1Y 0AS. Tel. 071-629 6602.
Sotheby's (auctioneers), 34-35 New Bond Street, London W1A 2AA. Tel. 071-493 8080.
Edric Van Vredenburg, 37 Bury Street, London SW1. Tel. 071-839 5818.
G. Sarti Antiques Ltd, 55 Jermyn Street SW1. Tel. 071-491 0449.

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