HG
HOUSE & GARDEN
APRIL
1990
Italy Now
Gore Vidal in the Garde
Giorgio Armani at Hom
Balthus in his Castle

Fine Italian Hands

Six Tuscan craftsmen carry on centuries-old traditions

BY CHRISTOPHER PETKANAS

It is said that the only thing the distinguished artisans of Tuscany and its hub, Florence, cannot make to order is disappointment. History, integrity, and technique are built into the region's traditional crafts like a guarantee. The variety of crafts themselves is eye-opening—from terra-cotta floor tiles promised to last three centuries to plain or fancy hand-carved picture frames; from night tables painted with chinoiserie to scagliola tabletops that trick the eye into thinking their surface decoration is marble. Tuscany is home to a wealth of workshops, and six of the finest discussed here—artisans adept at furniture restoration, terra-cotta production, the art of scagliola, frame making, fabric weaving, and silversmithing—are well worth the trip.

PAINTED FURNITURE Since the end of the last century, the Ponzianis of Florence have been identified with the soulful restoration of antique painted furniture, whether gilded or lacquered, Venetian or Louis XIV. Since the late 1940s the Ponzianis have also been crafting historically correct state-the-art copies of these same pieces as a less expensive alter tive. Today the pocket-size firm, located in a ravishi Renaissance palazzo in the woodworking quarter of Fl ence, is run by Maurizio Ponziani, the son of the found who employs a team of six artisans. Tables, chairs, desks, ca nets, chests of drawers, and more are all made to order, ha crafted, and hand-painted.

People who own replicas of the duchess of Windsor's jew may want to consider a Ponziani reproduction of her bl japanned Queen Anne bureau bookcase. Their facsimile seventeenth-century Spanish pharmacist's cupboar equipped with dozens of minuscule drawers—some r some false—that are meant to store herbs, but they would just as good for separating tagliolini from tagliatelle in the kitchen. Ponziani doesn't guarantee that your prose will improve by working at their Louis XVI–style writing table, its drawers and legs lavished with swags and garlands, but it seems likely. Some of the company's copies are so good they have been mistaken for period originals and sold as such by international auction houses. Maurizio is shocked they don't know better. A full eighty percent of Ponziani's business in reproductions is derived from the United States. Typically an American client will come into the shop

Mario Mariani, abo left, shapes a terr cotta pot destined hold a lemon tree. Above: From Bian Bianchi, an elabor scagliola tabletop. Left: A dining cha highlighted in gilt from Ponziani. Bel left: Framer Piero Franceschi in his Santo Spirito workshop. Below: Lisio's handwoven silk with a motif taken from Botticelli's *Primav*

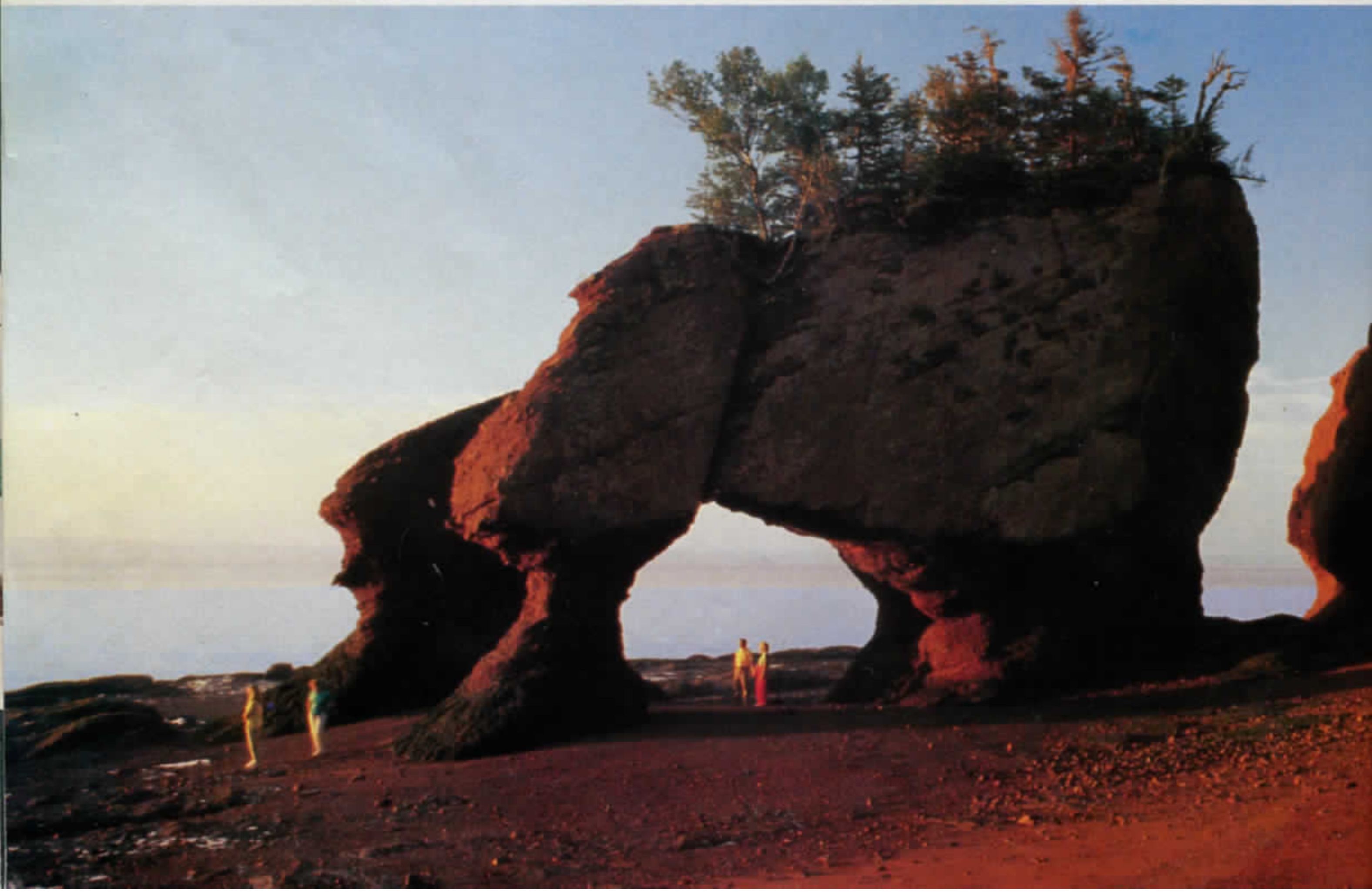
Ponziani doesn't guarantee your prose will improve by working at their Louis XVI–style writing table, but it seems likely

with a copy of Florence de Dampierre's *The Best of Painted Furniture*, turn to a page, and say, "I would like that." And they are thrilled when Maurizio Ponziani is able to give it to them, line for line. (Ponziani/Lo Studiolo, Via Santo Spirito 27, 50125 Florence; 55-287958)

TERRA-COTTA Like vineyards and olive groves, terra-cotta tiles, flowerpots, and garden statues are crucial to the Tuscan landscape. The finest and most durable in Italy, and some authorities would say the world, is from Impruneta, a once-important market town off the old road to Siena six miles south of Florence. The Etruscans who settled Impruneta learned to make terra-cotta from the Greeks around the fifth century B.C. The Romans also later produced it, but their technique never matched that of their predecessors'. It wasn't until Renaissance artists such as Donatello and Verrocchio started working in it that terra-cotta became a popular alternative to stone or marble. Brunelleschi handpicked Impruneta tiles that cap his duomo in Florence, and Della Robbia contributed terra-cotta decorations to the arches of Brunelleschi's Foundling Hospital on the Piazza Santissima Annunziata. Today nearly half of all Italian "baked earth" comes from the kilns of Impruneta.

One of Bianco Bianchi's tabletops in progress. The floral design is incised in marble and filled with a colored gypsum mixture called scagliola.

Although there are much older factories in the town, few operate on the same level as that of Mario Mariani, whose grandfather founded the business in 1914. Mariani's entire output is formed by hand and fired in a wood-burning kiln. Like every craftsman in



Impruneta, the reason he is there in the first place is the exceptionally smooth local gray clay. Because it absorbs much less moisture after firing than terra-cotta made with other inferior clays, it resists low winter temperatures that lead to cracking. The high iron and aluminum content of the raw material also contributes to strength and longevity.

Since chunky floor tiles one and a half inch thick and widemouthed containers for lemon trees obtain their first characteristically pink coloring from the oxidation of iron in the clay during firing, the quality of that heat is critical. Many of Mariani's contemporaries use easily operated methane gas ovens that produce a flat, crude, unvarying shade of orange considered hopelessly vulgar by terra-cotta aficionados. He and his clients prefer the subtle and unpredictable gradations that result from a wood fire.

Everything made by this good-natured artisan, including orcios designed to store olive oil and now used as garden decorations, follows the designs of his grandfather. Nonno Mariani left behind sketches and jottings that fill a notebook which Mario refers to as "my computer." (Mario Mariani, Via di Cappello 29, 50023 Impruneta; 55-201-1950)

SCAGLIOLA Dismissed as a minor art when it was introduced in Italy in the sixteenth century, scagliola has no pedigree problem today. A marblelike mixture of ground gypsum, pigment, and glue employed as filler in designs incised in marble or slate, scagliola is collected by English nobility (the duke of Kent for his apartments in Kensington Palace) and fashion nobility (Gianni Versace for his Lake Como villa).

At painted furniture specialists Ponziani, a desk drawer is embellished with a carefully brushed still life of fruit.

Both men's blue-chip resource for one-of-a-kind furniture incorporating the painstaking trompe l'oeil art of scagliola is Bianco Bianchi, who was an office worker and a moonlighting artisan until an American department store promotion in the late sixties generated enough business for him to devote himself to his craft full-time. He makes tables, small decorative boxes, as well as picture designs for hanging on the wall just as one would a painting, and he is pleased to carve them with any image a client suggests. Versace favors Neoclassical motifs: one of the eighteen tables he commissioned shows shapely amphoras; the angry head of Medusa crops up in another. The duke of Kent opted for his own coat of arms—a crown framed by a lion and a unicorn.

The gypsum used in scagliola is mined in the Apennines, a mountain chain that forms the boundary between Tuscany and Romagna. Dissolved in glue, it fills the design incised to a depth of about an eighth of an inch. Drying time is fifteen days, after which the surface is smoothed first with a razor, then a wet pumice stone. For complex realistic motifs such as birds and flowers, the process begins all over again with the carving and inlaying of the scagliola itself. (Le Scagliole di Bianco Bianchi e Figli, Viale Europa 117, 50125 Florence; 55-686118)

FRAMES "The artisan is an anachronism. He's the bicycle of today," says Piero Franceschi from behind his craftsman's curtain of brown curls. The fore-

In his workshop, Piero Franceschi makes frames that look as if they've been dipped in gold

most framer in Florence perceives himself as a kind of chronological error, but business could hardly be described as flat. There are always so many frames waiting to be picked up or delivered in his fifteenth-century Santo Spirito workshop and boutique, the 1940s atelier of realist painter Ottone Rosai, that people are often fooled into thinking there is actually something to buy. In fact, everything is made to order and chosen from a repertoire that includes lavishly ornamented Baroque or severely rectilinear Art Deco designs, Empire frames that look as if they have been dipped in gold, and simple fluted and marbleized frames that Franceschi has come to regard as his signature classics.

Franceschi works in all woods, including raw, splintery cast-off pieces he salvages from building sites and then insets, typically, with lozenges of colored resin. "I learn a lot by studying windows and doors, both of which are kinds of frames," he says. "If you look at them this way, man has been making frames for six thousand years."

The son of a brass smith and the grandson of a hat trimmer, Franceschi says he had learned the names of virtually all the tools he uses by the time he was seven. Early apprenticeships taught him that the artists whose paintings and drawings he would be hired to frame shouldn't influence him. "What interests me is the rapport between the work and the frame I am making. It makes no difference to me if the painter is Picasso or someone completely unknown." (Franceschi, Via Toscanella 28–38R, 50125 Florence; 55-284704)

TEXTILES If eight hours seems a ridiculously long time to produce a 3½-by-23-inch morsel of jacquard fabric, think of the three months that go into programming the thousands of perforated cards that set the turn-of-the-century pine handlooms in motion. As in 1906 when Giuseppe Lisio founded his namesake company, such is the time-consuming reality today of making what are surely the world's most extravagant, most elaborate, and most expensive damasks, figured silks, brocades, and chiseled velvets.

The Florentine firm employs just two full-time and two part-time weavers, and for their patient trouble and good strong legs (necessary to animate the

looms and achieve the proper tension in the cloth), only orders of sixty meters or less are accepted. Old Italian nobility make up the core of the tiny audience for Lisio's handwoven textiles, many of which are based on tapestries and on garments in paintings by Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Perugino, and Veronese. Others are taken from fabrics charged with historical meaning. Imperatore is a copy of a Byzantine cloth discovered in the sarcophagus of a bishop in Bamberg. Woven in Constantinople in the emperor's atelier, which catered exclusively to the court, it shows a figure on horseback that may be Constantine himself returning victorious from war. Dalmatica, another typically ornate design, is borrowed from the chasuble that is said to have belonged to Charlemagne. This silk shows Christ on an ash-blue ground with a procession of kings, patriarchs, monks, nuns, angels, and bishops.

In collaboration with Venetian textile manufacturer Lorenzo Rubelli, Lisio also offers a second collection that is produced on power looms yet looks almost as rich and luxurious as its labor-intensive counterparts. Designed to coordinate with the handwovens, these less expensive versions are stocked in Rubelli's own shops with branches located throughout Italy. But it is the handwovens that young men who are entering the priesthood and need proper vestments insist on. "They adore beautiful fabric," says Roberta Landini, who directs Lisio's weaving school. "Italian priests are very concerned about how they look." (Lisio Fondazione Arte della Seta, Via Benedetto Fortini 143, 50125 Florence; 55-680-1340)

SILVER In a tiny Florentine carriage house crowned by a vaulted ceiling, Paolo Pagliai and his trio of assistants

Three months go into programming the perforated cards that set Lisio's looms in motion

work miracles on silver in need of repair or replacement. When all of Florence was gearing up for Countess Fiametta Frescobaldi's 1988 wedding, Pagliai was called upon to add new shine to Santo Spirito's towering silver chandeliers—the very ones the Frescobaldis had donated to the cathedral two hundred years earlier. Heirloom teapots with faulty spouts and eighteenth-century flatware services requiring a few more forks are also standard fare for Pagliai, who learned his craft working alongside his father, Orlando. Equally adept at quality reproduction, Pagliai eschews mass-production techniques and still casts his pieces in one-shot molds handmade from octopus cartilage. He stocks the few display cases in his studio with extraordinarily convincing replicas of eighteenth-century Florentine trays, saltcellars, vegetable dishes, and charming ornamental shells of his own design. And though his client roster reads like a who's who of Florentine nobility, Pagliai remains the consummate humble artisan. "My work," he shrugs. "It's useful." (Paolo Pagliai, Borgo San Jacopo 41R, 50125 Florence; 55-282840). ♠